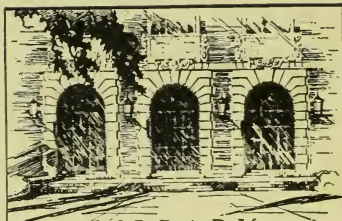




A
CHILD
WIDOW



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A CHILD WIDOW

A Novel

BY MRS. F. H. WILLIAMSON

AUTHOR OF 'IN WHITE AND GOLD,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. I.

London
CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY
1891

' The presence of her is young sun-rise
That gladdeneth, and in wondrous wise
Glorifieth the earth and skies.

* * * * * *

The memory of her is mellow light
In darkness, mingling something bright
With all things ; like a summer night.'

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A CHILD WIDOW

CHAPTER I.

APARTMENTS.

MOVING reluctantly along the narrow passage which was ordinarily dignified by the name of 'hall,' the dim light that filtered through the small thick panes of glass above the door falling on her upturned face in chastened rays, Millicent Bell's expression was a strange mixture of decision and doubt.

The first feeling seemed the more dominant as she advanced, and, drawing forward a chair, mounted upon it; then fixed a board on which

the word ' Apartments ' was inscribed, so that it might be seen from outside : but the latter was also very apparent as, her object achieved, she turned to retrace her steps.

The action she had taken was an important one, its outcome impossible to guess ; moreover, it was in defiance of all the advice she had been given, and in spite of repeated prayers from one whose prayers were very difficult to deny. She was quite young, too young to bear such a heavy responsibility ; but there was a gleam in her gray eyes that spoke to her courage, and the firm pressure of her curved lips when in repose was indication that she would not allow herself to be lightly turned aside from anything she took in hand. Yet that something distressed her now could be detected, and she stood there hesitating some moments, before, with a toss of her small well-shaped head, she gathered up her clinging draperies and ran downstairs.

When she reached the bottom, however, she paused again. On one side was the kitchen, and a woman came out to meet her with an uncertain smile and nervous movement of her hands down her apron.

‘ You’ve never really done it, Miss Millicent ?’ she whispered.

‘ Yes, it is done—*well* done, I believe. Don’t be afraid, Mrs. Scarrot ; we will help you if there is extra work.’

Her bright clear tones seemed to infuse new spirit into her hearer, who hurried back to her post near the fire, where something savoury was simmering in a saucepan, as she said over her shoulder :

‘ I have only been afraid for you young ladies. You know best, Miss Millicent, I’m sure of *that*.’

Strangely enough, the confidence she had inspired seemed to lessen Millicent’s faith in her own judgment ; she was wondering un-

easily whether there might not have been something of obstinacy in the persistent carrying out of her purpose as she opened the door of an opposite room and went inside.

If that were so, here seemed a foeman worthy of her steel, an opponent who would not be convinced ; who, as women sometimes do, disdained argument and held blindly to her own opinion still.

Two angry eyes flashed rebellion as they were upraised, and a crimson face turning towards her for a moment was speedily averted.

Millicent crossed over, and putting one arm round her sister's neck, laid her own cool face against hers, which was burning.

‘Nancy, won’t you trust me ? Can’t you believe I am acting, or trying to act, for the best ?’

Obstinate silence ; and cheek was pressed

to cheek more closely as the girl went on coaxingly :

‘ Nancy darling, it’s for your sake mostly—to keep a home where we can live together. You are too young, and far too pretty, dear, to go out into the world alone.’

A little mollified, Nancy looked round, her lips still pouting, but a lurking smile in her eyes.

‘ I was seventeen last June ; and at least one would not lose *caste* if one went out as governess or companion.’

‘ It is possible to lose something more essential,’ said Millicent dryly, yet with patience too.

‘ I dare say you mean independence.’

‘ That is a good thing enough in its way, but some day you may acknowledge we have kept a little more than that in keeping *home*.’

She was kneeling now beside the fire, trying to win a blaze from the dull red embers, and

presently a flame leapt up that lightened all the room and illumined the faces of the two sisters as they leant towards it.

Though a contrast to each other, they were yet singularly alike. Both had bright brown hair, which the brilliant firelight and their deep mourning gowns threw into relief, but what in Millicent's seemed like imprisoned sunshine was in Nancy's ruddier gold. Both had deep gray eyes fringed with curling lashes, but Millicent's were usually dreamy, capable of intense tenderness and pathos; while Nancy's laughed and danced the whole day long, and seemed as if they had never known a tear. Her lips, too, were very prone to laughter—'Laughing Lalage' had been her pet name ever since a child, and she had not gained it without good cause.

A year ago their father, Dr. Bell, had bought a practice in Brighton, it having been declared that sea-air would improve his then

failing health. He had taken a house and furnished it, and was scarcely settled when a severe attack of the disease from which he suffered prostrated him.

For some weeks he was confined to his room—not seriously ill, according to the opinion of the medical man who was summoned, only needing good nursing and great care. Nor were any fears entertained that he would not ultimately recover. It was only a few days before his death that there was any thought of danger, so that the end came with all the shock of a surprise.

His two daughters were left almost penniless and alone in a town where they were unknown, with no reliable person to counsel them as to their best course of action. All the capital at Dr. Bell's disposal had been expended on the purchase of this new practice, which was a fashionable one and worth a considerable sum. This had now gone beyond recovery.

Dr. Porter, who had attended the deceased, had, with a fine show of professional good comradeship, volunteered visits to many of his patients during the long illness—visits he was careful to turn to best advantage. A vulgar, ill-taught man, who had never succeeded by dint of his unaided exertions, he unscrupulously seized the opportunity which now offered to push his own interests, and gradually absorbed the greater number of his late colleague's patients into his own practice. Millicent, who had naturally a clear head for business, though as yet she had had no need to exercise it, wrote once to ask if there were nothing due to her father in return for professional services she was aware had been rendered by him, and received in reply the assurance that 'it was almost impossible now—some two or three months having elapsed since their unfortunate bereavement—to discover exactly how matters stood, and to dis-

entangle somewhat complicated accounts. He enclosed a cheque for £50, and trusted he would be forgiven if in sincerest sympathy he had erred on the side of generosity, remaining their true well-wisher—JAMES PORTER.'

The letter had not quite the effect which was intended. The money was accepted and civilly acknowledged, but with no exuberance of gratitude, Millicent having a shrewd suspicion that this was much below what was rightly due, yet being too proud to complain of an injustice they would be unable to prove without the publicity attendant on any close investigation, and from which she naturally shrank.

Having decided to let the matter remain as it was, she allowed the thought of it to trouble her no more, turning her attention to other possible ways of earning a livelihood.

Their account at the bank was already running very low, and their present rate of

expenditure being considerably more than they could afford, her first step was to dismiss their three women-servants, and engage in their stead an old charwoman who professed herself equal to the general work. She then made an attempt to let or sell their house, which, taken on a long lease, would otherwise be for some time on their hands. Unluckily, however, the idea did not strike her until the Brighton season was in full swing, and other houses were standing unoccupied with blank windows and placarded posts awaiting the same desired result.

After a few weeks of alternate hopes and fears the project had to be abandoned, and when affairs were beginning to look desperate, it came to Millicent as an inspiration that it might be possible for them to remain as they were, in comparative comfort, if they could only make up their minds to let the upper part of the house in lodgings.

The situation—Marine Square—was a good one, the house itself being convenient, and made attractive to the outside view by a mass of flowers in the windows and climbing about the balcony ; while, being at the quiet end of the town, no objectionable people were likely to offer themselves as temporary tenants.

But, as has been said, she had considerable opposition to encounter before she was allowed to carry her plan into execution. Nancy was furious, refusing to listen to reason, fighting with every weapon she possessed to avoid what she considered an indignity, a degradation ; even Mrs. Scarrot, who was inclined to overrate and give exaggerated credit to all the young mistress of the house proposed, was doubtful as to the expediency of this her latest project.

One other Millicent had gone through the form of consulting, though perhaps with no intention of taking his advice. This was a

certain Mark Skene, the possessor of a small estate near the country town where the best part of their lives had been spent, and who only lately had met them again in Brighton, showing a very sincere desire to resume their former friendship.

So far as he himself had been concerned, it had been something more than friendship. He had fallen very deeply in love with Millicent Bell, and a year ago had asked her to be his wife; but though her refusal then had been sufficiently decisive and he had not seen her since, he had by no means abandoned hope of ultimate success. Naturally he had objected to the course she intended to adopt, and had used all his influence to prevent what he looked upon as a very rash proceeding. But every remonstrance had been in vain. Confident that she was doing what was best for them both under the circumstances, the girl persevered in her intentions, and it was

only now, when the step was taken, that she began to seriously question its expediency. A troubled look had come over her face as she gazed intently into the very heart of the fire, where a burning glow, caught by the draught, intensified and quivered; and Nancy, who thought she detected signs of wavering, endeavoured to push her supposed advantage.

‘It is not even ladylike,’ she objected.

Millicent smiled.

‘I have a theory,’ she answered quietly, ‘that anything a lady does is ladylike.’

‘And there is Mr. Skene; he disapproved of the plan, I know.’

Of the two sisters, Nancy was the acknowledged beauty; yet now, when a brilliant colour suffused her cheeks, and her lovely eyes took fire in sudden scorn, Millicent might have carried off the palm; moreover, she possessed what is only granted to perhaps one

woman in a hundred—the gift of intense attractiveness. The very turn of her small head bewitched one ; the gesture of her hands—small as a child's, but exquisitely shaped, with a subtle appearance of power—and every movement of her slim and lithsome body allured even when she had no desire to charm. Mr. Skene's infatuation had been very apparent, but Millicent had always chosen to ignore it.

‘He has no right to have an opinion on the subject,’ she declared now with pride.

‘That is not his fault,’ demurely.

‘Nancy, how you tease! Can't you talk seriously for a moment?’

‘My mood is serious in the extreme—as serious as our position ; it can't be more so. In my mind's eye, Millicent, I see a family composed exclusively of children running wild on the ground-floor, and a young man of objectionable tendencies—who will lie in wait

for and ogle us on the stairs—occupying the rooms above. Surely,' with a shudder of irrepressible disgust, 'there must be pleasanter ways of earning money!'

'Very likely ; but not within our compass, I am afraid. Be patient, Lalage ; it won't be so bad as you think. Some dear old lady will come who will be like a mother to us ; or an antiquated and eccentric spinster who will leave us all her money, and——'

A loud knock and simultaneous ringing of the bell interrupted her. Nancy started to her feet, both hands thrown across her breast in a delightful attitude of expectant dread ; and Mrs. Scarrot appeared in the doorway wiping her hands with her apron, with the air of one who is prepared to meet a crisis.

'If it's after the lodgings, miss——' she began.

'Tell them to go away ! Tell them it's all

a mistake and we are very sorry,' cried Nancy excitedly.

Whatever of trepidation Millicent felt she concealed under an expression of calm superiority.

'Is it at all likely that anyone would come the very moment the board was put up—unless, of course,' with an attempted laugh, 'they had been waiting opposite in the hope of our doing so?'

'But if it is?' persisted Mrs. Scarrot, desiring definite instructions.

'Then you must ask the people in and come for me.'

Nancy said no more, but subsided into a chair with a little air of resignation that might have been amusing had it not also been pathetic. As Mrs. Scarrot was heard stumbling up the dark staircase, her sister looked at her wistfully, wondering whether she were doing right in running counter to feelings

which were evidently stronger than she supposed. The doubt threw an added softness into her voice as she pleaded earnestly :

‘ Don’t take it so to heart, Nancy. It can be no one at this hour. Until to-morrow at least you are safe ; and—Lalage, look up and smile—I promise I will try to think of some other means of earning money, something you won’t dislike.’

‘ You promise ?’ eagerly.

‘ Yes, I promise.’

As she spoke Mrs. Scarrot was heard clattering down the stairs, and the next moment was saying in an impressive whisper :

‘ If you please, Miss Millicent, it’s a gentleman wishes to see the rooms.’

CHAPTER II.

THEIR FIRST LODGER.

NANCY proved herself to be possessed of sense and generosity at this juncture, refusing to allow the applicant to be turned away un-interviewed when Millicent professed herself willing to abide by the promise she had made.

‘ If it is not the old lady we were talking of, it may be a treasure of the opposite sex who, after all, would be more amenable. Don’t turn fortune from our doors.

“ By the pricking of my thumbs
A benefactor this way comes.”’

‘ It was agreed we should wait until to-morrow before deciding.’

‘That was because we thought it impossible anyone could come to-day. If this is the right person I shall rebel no longer. I shall call it *Fate*.’

So Millicent went upstairs and found a man standing in the hall, who she guessed must be a servant, while looking beyond him through the open door she saw a four-wheeled cab laden with luggage, and someone sitting inside, who leant forward as she came in sight.

‘Your master wishes to see the rooms?’ she questioned.

‘I think, ma’am, if you would not mind the trouble of stepping outside, Sir Peter would like to speak to you first. He is an invalid,’ was answered civilly.

Something in his tone aroused her curiosity. She looked in his face and disliked it intensely even in this cursory glance. It was lean and lantern-jawed, clean-shaven and with close-cropped hair, so that there was nothing to

take one's attention from the dark restless eyes that, never fairly meeting your gaze, seemed always to attract it. They were inscrutable in their expression, sly, yet humorous as well, with an evident capability of extracting amusement from what in some might have aroused repulsion. His thin lips in their defined curve wore an aspect of a constant smile quite out of harmony with his manner, which was grave to funerealism.

Nothing could have been quieter and more respectful than his bow as he moved aside for Millicent to pass; yet even then a sense of being ridiculed oppressed her, and she was determined if the master were anything like the man she would decline to receive them on any terms.

But womanly pity softened the rigidity of the demeanour she had insensibly adopted, when she confronted the occupant of the cab—an elderly man, whose hair and fierce

moustache were iron-gray, and whose bronzed face was lined deeply from suffering as well as age. In spite of his bent figure and general appearance of valetudinarianism he retained a soldierly bearing, and the courtesy with which he greeted her prepossessed Millicent in his favour. Having made known his wants and discovered the terms on which he might be suited, he expressed a wish to see the house. With assistance he managed to alight and was supported upstairs, Millicent calling for the lamps to be brought as she followed slowly.

It was not quite dark, and, looking round, Sir Peter Cairne was favourably impressed by the homelike air of his surroundings—the little prettinesses and signs of refinement so rarely seen in rooms intended to be ‘let.’

‘I think, madam, there is no doubt but this will suit me excellently well, if you are prepared to receive myself and servant as tenants. My name is Cairne—Sir Peter Cairne.’

He stopped short as someone entered ; and, turning, Millicent saw it was Nancy who had come—Nancy, with tossed hair and cheeks burning still from excitement, the light she held shining straight into her eyes : a pretty picture which the old Indian officer was not slow to appreciate, as could be seen from his lingering gaze and the effort he had to make to finish the interrupted sentence.

‘I was telling you——’ he resumed ; but Millicent stopped him with a smile.

‘I am quite satisfied, and we will do our best to make you comfortable if you stay.’

‘You are most kind, but, if you will permit me, there is something I must say before allowing you to commit yourself to anything. Perfect frankness is always desirable, in my opinion, and what I have to say might alter your views—to my great regret.’

Sir Peter’s well-trained servant had taken

the lamp and was now drawing down the blinds, so that Nancy was free to depart ; but she felt so strong a desire to remain that she did not attempt to resist it, and ranged herself quietly by her sister's side.

‘The fact is,’ he went on, with a quietude which, without intent, became pathetic, ‘I am an old man, and suffering from an incurable disease which might reach its crisis any moment. I think I have no right to enter your house without warning you that it is possible I might not leave it—alive.’

Millicent's eyes were filled with tears, as, bending towards him, she said gently :

‘I am very glad you came to us. We will do all we can for you to lighten your sufferings. You must never be afraid that you are giving trouble.’ While Nancy, more impulsive, caught his hand as it lay on the arm of the chair and pressed it between her own.

‘We will nurse you and cure you!’ she cried excitedly, and could say no more.

Sir Peter also found no words forthcoming. Having knocked about for so many years, he had been tolerably confident that he knew his world, and was taken utterly aback at this unexpected warmth of sympathy.

Of lodgings he had more than a little experience, but nothing like this had ever come within its range. The two sweet faces near him, both aglow with youth and feeling, bewildered his somewhat severe sense of the fitness of things; and he could *only* stare at them helplessly, wondering if he were awake or only dreaming.

A feeling of restraint that seized them after reaching this height of enthusiasm was relieved by the monotonous tones of the manservant, who suggested that Sir Peter, having gone through considerable fatigue, would be

the better for some nourishment ; and Nancy, smiling brightly at her adopted charge, ran downstairs to procure it.

Millicent remained behind to make other necessary arrangements, and in a very short time the luggage was brought in, the cab dismissed, and the Bells' first lodger was duly installed.

Mrs. Scarrot was waiting breathlessly for the latest intelligence, and greeted Nancy when she appeared with an eager stream of questions.

' Was it a young man ? Was he handsome ? ' were among the first, and her disappointment was extreme when she received decisive negatives in reply ; though some consolation was derived from the news that he was rich and possessor of a title.

' He'll marry Miss Millicent, maybe, and you'll not have to worrit about money any more,' she commented hopefully.

‘Why should he not marry *me*?’ asked Nancy, a little ruffled.

She was cutting delicate slices of bread and butter and piling them on a plate, but stopped in her work to express what she considered righteous indignation.

‘How is it that no one ever seems to remember that *I* am grown-up, passably good-looking, and might some day have a lover too?’ she complained.

‘Maybe you will when Miss Millicent’s married.’

‘Promotion going by seniority,’ laughed Nancy, recovering her good temper and resuming her work.

It was only now and then she felt a little crushed by her sister’s exceeding attractiveness, never *jealous*. There was far too much good feeling between them for that, and though Millicent was only two years the elder, there had always been something maternal in

her attitude that the other instinctively appreciated and respected. Never had she opposed any wish of Millicent's so strenuously as this last one, to which even now she was becoming reconciled. She scarcely knew whether to feel ashamed or amused at her quick conversion ; she had only room just then in her heart for intense sympathy with the lonely old man who had come to them, as he believed, to die.

‘Marriage is a queer thing,’ moralized Mrs. Scarrot, as she set about preparing dinner for the new arrival. ‘Why ever women are so set upon it beats me altogether. Not but what a man’s a useful thing to have about a house ; and, when all’s said and done, it’s a matter of bread and cheese. Eh, dear, marriage is a lottery, no doubt ; but every now and then it’s them that deserve it have the luck to win the prizes. I’ve known a case—but perhaps I’ve told it you before, Miss Nancy.’

‘Then I should like to hear it again,’ pleasantly ; ‘I want to be amused while the kettle boils.’

‘Dear, dear, it’s a queer story ! A widow woman with only one daughter—about seven or eight—with a wonderful idea of picking up all she could in the way of learning, and keeping herself *to* herself, not mixing with the rough children that ran wild about the streets. She was always terribly proud and dainty in her ways. She was pretty too, and well-mannered, so that people noticed her always, and at last a lady, who visited the poor and gave a great deal in charity, took a liking to her and begged the mother to let her educate her properly. Lizzie—that was the child’s name—went almost crazy with delight at the idea, and the mother—well, she only wanted to do what was best for the child ; she never had any other thought.’

Something on the fire required Mrs. Scarrot's attention at that moment, and it was perhaps the smoke going into her eyes that caused her to draw her hand hastily across them as she went on :

‘So Lizzie went to school, and in a few years she had grown into a young lady, who sang and played the piano, and dressed so neatly it was a pleasure to set eyes on her. She was prettier than ever—much too pretty for her lot in life. It was natural that she should grow discontented and grumble a little at the change : her mother was no companion for her then ; she had no one to speak to at all, and of course she was dull and fretted. Who could blame her ?’

The question was put with such fierceness that Nancy started and ejaculated, ‘No one !’ without considering to what she stood committed.

The story had not interested her much ;

moreover, it was not the first time she had heard it, as she now remembered.

Mrs. Scarrot continued :

‘The end was that the life became impossible to bear. It was fortunate that the chance came for her to go as nursery governess to a lady living here in Brighton—a very rich lady, who made much of her, and took her about with her, and treated her like her own daughter.’

‘Is she there still ?’ asked Nancy absently.

‘I’m speaking of years ago. She’s married now ; she married that lady’s son, and has a house of her own, and visits with the best of them. There’s not a prettier woman in London, or a better-dressed one — so I’ve heard.’

‘And the mother has gone to live with them, I suppose ?’

The spoon with which Mrs. Scarrot was stirring something in a saucepan fell noisily

against its side and then slipped in, which may have accounted for the irritability of her tone as she replied :

‘ You don’t understand, Miss Nancy. Her mother was a working woman, like myself—rough and uneducated ; she would only have disgraced her. Lizzie was very good to her and gave her an allowance, so she could spend the rest of her life in comfort and never needed to work again ; and I’—wincing a little as the recovered spoon touched and burnt her fingers—‘ I think she loves her mother, though they never see each other.’

‘ You must have known them very well, and can judge better ; but I should think a daughter’s duty did not end there,’ with youthful severity.

‘ Marriage brings its own duties and its troubles, too. Most of us have enough of them ; but it’s only those who wear the shoe that know where it pinches.’

‘All the same, I shall be hurt if Millicent casts me off when she is Lady Cairne.’

‘Ah, well, maybe you’ll have a sweetheart of your own before that comes off, after all, Miss Nancy.’

‘Indeed, I hope so,’ devoutly.

Mrs. Scarrot had left the kitchen, and Nancy was alone when Millicent came downstairs.

‘Is tea ready yet?’ she inquired.

‘Just ready. I will take it up to him.’

‘There is no occasion to do that. Mrs. Scarrot can go.’

‘I like to do it.’

‘What a child it is!’ smoothing the bright, dishevelled curls.

‘Always going into extremes, you mean. A ballastless being who blows cold for no reason, and the next moment is blowing hot. Millicent, do you think I shall ever, *ever* be so—so *thoroughly satisfactory* as you?’

The elder sister smiled indulgently.

‘It is possible you might gain that giddy eminence with years ; but,’ speaking very softly now, ‘I love you very well—just as you are.’

CHAPTER III.

NANCY IN DISGRACE.

DEBONAIR, distinguished-looking, and exquisitely got-up, Mr. Skene seemed decidedly out of his element as he groped his way down the creaking stairs that led to the kitchen floor of the little house in Marine Square.

The charwoman, who had preceded him, naturally more at home there, was quicker in her movements, and had opened the door of the sitting-room and announced him before, guiding himself carefully by wall and hand-railing, he had reached the bottom. He was dusting his coat and fingers with the glove of which he had hastily divested himself as he went in.

‘I am afraid you found it very awkward getting down,’ said Millicent, flushing, as they shook hands.

‘The line of country was new. I shall do better another time. It is worth a little trouble to get here. How comfortable you look!’ glancing round the warmly-curtained room, with its brightness of flowers and unmistakable signs of woman’s taste and refinement.

‘We *are* comfortable. The only drawback is the approach. That dark tumble-down staircase reminds me of a bridge across a moat—it might, on an emergency, help us to sustain a siege. We used to light the gas, but that gave it an uncanny look; we felt like gnomes or miners down a shaft.’

‘You are the pluckiest woman I ever met,’ drawled Skene admiringly.

‘What, for living on a basement and going up and down those stairs several times a day?’

‘For the whole thing; the courage with which you have met your misfortunes—your resolution to conquer them in the end.’

‘Needs must when someone drives, you know. We could not sit and starve.’

‘There is nothing driving you but your own strong will. If you wanted a home——’

‘I mean to make one,’ hastily.

‘Don’t be afraid——’ taking the chair that, with a gesture, she had assigned to him. ‘I was not going to bother you again. You made it very clear to me once that you would rather do anything than be my wife.’

‘Did you come to remind me of that?’

It had always been very patent to Mark Skene, who, though by no means given to self-depreciation, was yet singularly free from self-conceit, that this woman he would have given his soul to win, not only did not love, but actually disliked him. The Millicent he knew best was not the Millicent that others knew.

It seemed as though every fibre in her body resisted his influence, as though his presence caused an actual repulsion she could not attempt to disguise, as a few people feel all the electricity in their bodies quivering on edge at the contact, even the vicinity, of a cat. Generally graceful and a little languid in her movements, she became stiff and almost awkward when he was there; her expression, in whose variety lay her chief charm, grew set; even her voice hardened. Unobserved, he had noticed her with other people, and knowing what she was then, passionately resented the difference in her manner towards himself, all the more that he had not the right to complain.

She herself was conscious of her own uncompromising demeanour, and in rare moments of repentance tried to make up for it with a forced sweetness whose motive he instinctively guessed, so that it was very

galling when he found his chains the more firmly riveted thereby. At this moment she felt ashamed of the scornful inflection she knew had been in her voice, when he answered pleasantly :

‘I came to offer my help. Surely there is something a man can accomplish which you might find difficult to do. My life is an idle one, as you are aware, and also I hope that it is very much at your service.’

‘You are very good to us always—I know that.’

He moved impatiently in his chair.

‘Now, that’s the merest conventionality of phrases, a weakness I should have thought you would have been above. Won’t you accept my help as frankly as it is offered, without asking, as a friend of mine always does on like occasions — “What’s his *bad* motive?”’

‘I am sure you mean it all most kindly.’

He shrugged his shoulders in despair.

‘No, no,’ she continued, laughing; ‘I am not going to protest nor to praise you any more. If I refuse your assistance, it is simply because we do not need it.’

Not being unacquainted with some of the difficulties of their position, Skene felt naturally surprised, and waited for an explanation.

‘The fact is, we have disregarded your advice. You may have guessed as much when you found us down here. We have let one suite of the rooms upstairs very well, so our rent at least is secure; and we do not find it in the least unpleasant—rather the reverse.’

‘All the same, I wish you had not done it. If you were in need of money, you knew I would have been too glad to have lent it you, to——’

‘That would have only been postponing an

evil day. I should not like to incur a debt I was not positive that I could pay.'

'You could have repaid it months, *years* hence—never—or in heaven.'

'Ah! well, you see, I was not certain of meeting you there,' she answered lightly, but in a tone that warned him off the subject.

'Of course you are the best judge of your own actions; but—I told you I thought the project most unwise, situated as you are. I am afraid I cannot alter my opinion. Ladies living alone cannot be too careful, and it is impossible to judge people at first glance. You might find yourself saddled with the veriest adventurers. There are a hundred risks and dangers.'

'Luck is with us at the outset. Our first lodger is unexceptionable in every way. It is Sir Peter Cairne, an old Indian officer, broken down in health, but quite charming; and he

seems to wish to be our friend. Do you know him ?

‘ I know who he is. He married a very rich widow, who died soon afterwards and left him all her money ; though there was a son, I heard. You have come to no harm, so far.’

‘ And I have faith our good fortune will continue,’ brightly.

‘ But Miss Nancy — she was very much against it—what does she say now ?’

‘ She has come over to the enemy, meaning *me*. Sir Peter has taken a great fancy to her, and she waits on him and nurses him most devotedly. She has forgotten her hurt dignity altogether.’

Mr. Skene rose and stood with his back to the fire for some moments without speaking.

While he would not have confessed it even to himself, it was nevertheless true that he was at heart displeased at this improvement in their prospects. He had hoped more than he

knew that the troubles he had foreseen would have the effect of inclining Millicent to listen to his suit—if not for her own, for her sister's sake. His offer of assistance was therefore genuinely meant, and he felt the more annoyed that she had succeeded without his aid, having realized from the first that in her necessity lay his best chance.

While he was thinking thus, her mind had not been inactive. Taking advantage of his preoccupation, she was studying him intently, and wondering what was the cause of her unreasoning dislike.

The instinct which women are supposed to share with dogs has always been a peg on which to hang numberless little feminine weaknesses and whims, but Millicent prided herself on being just, and wished to be thought practical as well. The man had always behaved with dignity and generosity so far as she was concerned, and she had never heard

anything to his disadvantage to justify her feeling. Moreover, his appearance was in his favour. Although a little below the medium height, he was well made, and held himself well. His fair moustaches and hair, which was allowed to grow into his neck just long enough to curl, also his large, rather languishing blue eyes, generally half closed, all tended to make him seem better-looking than he really was, and inclined one to overlook the fact that his nose was out of proportion short, his lips too full, and sensual in their expression. His voice was charming, low and *trainante*; his manners gentlemanly, assuming naturally a protecting caressiveness with women—with whom, indeed, he was usually popular. As so often happens, it was only when his whole heart was set on victory he failed, every effort retarding, rather than accelerating, his endeavour.

Now from under his helmet-lidded eyes he

surveyed her quietly for a moment undetected, noting her critical expression, divining that he was being weighed in the balance, and, without adequate reason, found wanting. The idea irritated him, and made him remark abruptly :

‘ It is an extraordinary instance of the perversity of human nature that women, variable as they are, will only change their minds when it suits themselves, never to suit anybody else.’

‘ You are speaking of Nancy ?’

‘ Perhaps, but thinking most of you.’

‘ Fickleness is not a fault of mine.’

‘ I am sure it is not. I almost wish it were.’

It was another of Skene’s grievances that Millicent would never give him her whole attention—that when she talked to him she always worked as well. Now she was apparently absorbed in a tea-cloth whose embroidery was in stitches requiring to be

counted, which gave her an excuse for letting his remark pass unanswered.

‘If Nancy marries——’ he began again presently, but was stopped by an exclamation :

‘Nancy ! Why, she is a mere child !’

‘A very pretty one ; the last year she has developed wonderfully, and grown very womanly in her ways. If she is a child now, you will not keep her so long.’

‘Living together, I have not noticed the change. Is that the reason you were so against our letting rooms ? Did you think it a mistake on *her* account ?’

He had roused her interest now. Her work had fallen from her hands, and she was gazing in his face with wide-open, anxious eyes.

‘You think it may spoil her prospects—be a danger to her, perhaps ?’ she continued impatiently, as, fascinated by her loveliness, he gazed back, forgetting to reply.

‘That is a very real objection,’ he answered, noticing that she only thought of her sister, never of herself, and taking his cue therefrom. ‘You see, she has not your dignity and pride. She is so young and light-hearted, a man might be misled by her manner. If your father had lived it would have been different; she would have met her admirers on equal terms. As it is—as it is, you are both in a false position. In these degenerate days beauty should be hedged in by thorns, and you—are quite defenceless.’

He watched her very closely as he spoke. Nothing he had said had been without motive. So that he could imbue her with a sense of her own helplessness, lead her to rely upon his strength and wider experience, he cared not what pain she might endure.

Rising from her chair, she had gone over to the window, and was looking up into the street.

‘How dark it is getting ! Nancy should not be out alone. She never thinks—she does not understand. Ah ; there she is !’ breathing a relieved sigh.

A little later Nancy herself burst in upon them, bringing a breath of the fresh sea-air and some of the wintry sunshine with her. She leant against the wall gasping and half laughing, too excited to speak at first.

‘Nancy ! what is it ?’ cried Millicent, in alarm.

‘Don’t be angry, Millie darling. It was not my fault, really. I could not help it. I never dreamed that he would follow me. He came right to the door.’

‘Who followed you ? *Why?*’ sharply.

‘I’ll tell you from the beginning, if you won’t look like that. It is nothing very serious, after all.’

Endeavouring to appear unconcerned, Nancy unburdened herself of what she had been

carrying, and now was standing on the fender, smoothing back a few loose strands of hair before the mirror that hung above the mantel-board. Her desire to confess and be forgiven was quenched by Mark Skene's presence and a supercilious expression she thought she saw upon his face. Not before him would she express regret for what had occurred, penitent as she already felt.

‘It all happened in a moment. The wind is very high ; it is blowing quite a gale ; along the sea-front I could scarcely struggle against it, and, coming out of a shop in East Street, where I had been buying some things, I was blown right into a man. I nearly knocked my hat off, and when I put up my hand to save that, one of my parcels came undone, and some ribbon flew out like a streamer and wound itself round the man's neck. He could not help laughing as he disentangled himself, and—I laughed too.’

Millicent stole a glance at Skene, who, well satisfied that chance seemed to be playing into his hands, could not repress the almost imperceptible assumption of superiority which may be permitted a man who refrains from audibly remarking, 'I told you so.'

Unaware of the different sentiments she was evoking by her narrative, and gaining courage from the silence in which it was received, Nancy went on :

'Directly I had got everything all right I hurried home, but whenever I turned he was following, not very closely, but evidently keeping me in sight.'

'What made you look behind you?' in horrified surprise Millicent found it impossible to repress, and which was not in the least modified by the *naïveté* of the reply :

'I wanted to see if he were coming. So long as I went straight down the Parade I

could not tell for certain that it was not his way as well as mine ; but when I got to the corner of the Square, and *he turned too, then* '—concluded Nancy shamefacedly—' *I ran.*'

'Oh ! Nancy, Nancy !'

'I don't know what *he* did—I was too afraid to look ; but he came up before Mrs. Scarrot opened the door. I think he said something—I did not listen. *Millie ! who is that ?*'

For the bell had rung again, and an elegant rat-tat followed, which sent the colour from her cheeks, and made her cling trembling to her sister's arm.

'I will go and see,' said Millicent, releasing herself with gentle force.

'Let me do that much for you,' said Skene, advancing nearer to her side, and speaking with persuasiveness that only required encouragement to become something more assertive.

‘It is better I should go myself. It is well the man should understand that we are capable of taking care of ourselves.’

‘He is a gentleman,’ put in Nancy quickly.

‘So it would appear from what you have told us, and his intrusion now.’

With head upraised, her delicate nostrils dilated in contempt, Millicent swept from the room.

Nancy also did not choose to remain. Between Mr. Skene and herself there was no very friendly feeling at any time, and she was guiltily convinced that what had happened now could not have raised her in his estimation. With a half-inaudible excuse she escaped, going across to the kitchen to be comforted by Mrs. Scarrot.

For nearly a quarter of an hour Skene waited, and when no one returned he made his way cautiously upstairs. There was a light in the narrow hall, but he could see

no one there. Nancy's undisciplined admirer was evidently routed, and he concluded the victor was recovering from the effects of the encounter.

It struck him that such a victory would further his ends almost as well as a defeat, and that Millicent must surely be convinced now of her natural weakness, and in a future emergency trust to him, their only friend.

A slight sound startled him, and turning sharply, he discovered that he was not, as he supposed, alone. Drawn in close against the wall, to make room for him to go by, was a man in ordinary servant's dress, whom he might have passed unnoticed had it not been for the oddity of appearance, by which Millicent also had been struck. The mysterious quiet of his presence, the shifty eyes, the smile which was carved upon his face and never altered, conveying an impression of unholy mirth—these riveted Skene's atten-

tion, and he questioned the man rather sharply who he was.

‘My name is Jaynes, sir. I am Sir Peter Cairne’s valet,’ was returned respectfully.

As he spoke he crossed the hall, and opened the door for his interlocutor to pass out.

The current of his thoughts temporarily changed, Mark Skene walked slowly through the Square, looking back once or twice to where in the doorway the valet was still standing imperturbable and grim.

‘What an uncanny-looking fellow! I should not like to live in the same house with him,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Now I think of it, I never heard the sound of his footsteps as he walked—a creepy, crawly sort of fellow, who would steal into your room at midnight, murder you as you slept, and go undetected, except that, upon my soul! with such a villainous cast of countenance, a man might be hanged upon a bare suspicion.’

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE GROUND-FLOOR.

MILLICENT's wrath had by no means subsided when she reached the hall-door. Opening it with an indignant jerk, she stood in the aperture—a picture, framed so, of tragic indignation and wounded pride. The very simplicity and sombreness of her garb seemed to italicize the dignity of her attitude, and the man before her, who was an artist, was momentarily struck dumb by her wondrous grace, as, with a regal uplifting of her head, the faintest raising of her brows, she invited an explanation of his presence there.

The darkness was behind her as a back-

ground; the soft evening light from the street was thrown athwart her face, and on the slim fingers that were twisted in the folds of her black gown. Leslie Wolffe thought he had never seen anyone so lovely, at the same time so unconscious of her loveliness.

‘There are apartments to be let?’ he said at last, with an apologetic upward glance at the board, which was the sole excuse he could offer for what he was beginning to understand was an unpardonable breach of decorum.

‘Yes,’ she said quietly, but with no encouragement in her tone.

She, too, was puzzled by his appearance, nothing in which bore out the idea she had unconsciously formed. Having expected to confront someone of that type which is a familiar one at seaside places, from whom she might have anticipated such impertinence as that of which Nancy had had cause to com-

plain, she was utterly taken aback when she saw before her a man more than thirty years of age, of grave countenance and courteous bearing, who, very quietly dressed, had 'gentleman' written in every line of his loosely-knit figure and pleasant face. Was it possible that there was some mistake, that by mere coincidence he had chanced to make his appearance so soon after Nancy's undesirable adventure?

When, emboldened by her evident bewilderment, he asked to see the rooms, no reasonable objection suggested itself; and reluctantly she led the way to the sitting-room—only a few paces off on the same floor—answering his questions as briefly as was compatible with perfect politeness. Though she had the air of a queen in disguise, she was a mere girl after all, and had no experience to help her out of a very difficult dilemma. She had thought by her manner to overawe him, and when he refused

to be overawed, found she had no second move with which to circumvent his tactics. Moreover, she was not certain that he was the person who required to be crushed, and was naturally unwilling to turn away a further source of income without good reason.

He, for his part, found a wicked enjoyment in her growing confusion and valiant endeavour to conceal the same from himself ; though, as a matter of fact, he was equally desirous of putting an end to an escapade of which already he was heartily ashamed.

Lured onward by the gracefulness of Nancy's flying form and backward glances, he had followed her hither, and was piqued that she had managed, like a will-o'-the-wisp, to elude him just as she was overtaken ; yet he had only meant to frighten her in revenge for the chase she had led him when he knocked at the door—the printed board, which had caught his sight, having given him an excuse. It had not

entered his mind to carry the adventure any further. He had rooms at the Grand Hotel, with which he had been well satisfied ; it was only his present surroundings made him fancy that perhaps he had not been so very comfortable after all, and that the quietude of this end of the town would be more favourable to the progress of his work. The furniture was also more grateful to the eye, more elegant and artistic, not having been chosen with any thought that it would be ever put to its present uses ; while as for the landlady, she was a picture in herself. Already he was inclining towards a belief that, by happy chance, he had lighted on a place which fitted all his requirements, when his gaze encountered a large photograph of the two sisters—Millicent, sweetly serious with dreamy eyes, Nancy bright with laughter—and he was studying it rather more closely than consistent with good manners, when an impatient movement from his companion re-

minded him he was not alone, and must either make good his presence there or pave the way to his departure.

‘I could come into the rooms at once, I suppose?’ he questioned, deciding hurriedly on his course of action.

‘There would be no objection to your doing so, if——’ ‘If I accept you as a tenant’ was on her lips, but she lacked the courage to finish her sentence. It seemed a rudeness which he had done nothing, to her certain knowledge, to deserve; and, bewildered and distressed, she felt doubtful of her right to refuse to take him in without stating her objection.

Perfectly well aware of the substance of her thoughts, he was careful not to confirm what was only a faint suspicion by his manner, and very quietly informed her that he would go at once to fetch his luggage.

Millicent stared at him in open-eyed dismay.

So decisive a move was entirely unexpected ; for the moment she found it difficult to believe in his earnestness, yet, at the same time, was proudly convinced he would not have dared to jest.

She heard Nancy go lightly past the door and run upstairs, singing snatches of a well-known air as she went—having already forgotten her misdemeanour, and with no suspicion of its dire result. It was impossible, Millicent felt, that she could allow this man to come if he had insulted her sister. But supposing there were some mistake, supposing he were innocent—he *looked* innocent.

All the while he was watching her, keen amusement in his bright blue eyes, when suddenly he was struck by a change in her expression. It became radiant with anticipatory triumph as she recovered in an instant the superiority of demeanour she had impressed upon his consciousness at first.

‘We have not discussed — terms,’ she remarked frigidly, though her eyes gleamed with suppressed malice, quickly hidden from him by lowered lashes.

‘I do not suppose we shall disagree about them,’ he returned ; but could not restrain an ejaculation when she informed him that five guineas a week, exclusive of extras, was what she expected for the somewhat limited accommodation of one sitting and one bed room.

It had come as a flash of inspiration that to double the sum she intended to demand for the rooms would be a sure and easy method of extricating herself from what might prove a false position. She could not resist one upward glance to judge of its success, and when their eyes met he divined her intention, at the same moment resolving to frustrate it.

The attitude she had adopted, the very turn

of her head—at once despotic and exulting—the movement of her arm as she swept back her draperies and stood aside for him to pass: these roused his combativeness and lent some asperity to his tone when, quite contrarily to her expectation, he declared himself content to give what she had asked, and made no further comment on the subject.

As he left the room, generous so far that he would not look in her direction and thus seem to be rejoicing in her discomfiture, he thought he heard a movement behind him—an impulsively spoken word.

Turning, he saw that she had abandoned the victorious pose which had partly aggravated him into winning the battle at whatever cost, and leaning forward, shamefaced and crimson, was trying to say something that would not be forced from her lips, so great was her sense of humiliation and defeat.

‘ Did you speak ? ’ he asked gently, bending

his head to her level. But her courage had already evaporated, and she could only stammer out: 'It is nothing—nothing at all,' and so let him go, believing that presently he would return to take up his abode with them for an indefinite period at the exorbitant rate of payment she had demanded.

The hall-door closed behind him, and Millicent, in her desperation, felt a childish longing to put up the chain and so secure themselves from further intrusion. Then the comical side of the question struck her with irresistible force, and she smiled to think how easily she had been checkmated in the game which she had felt so sure of winning without the loss of a single piece.

After all, she was by no means vanquished yet. If the man proved to be the same who had followed Nancy, she could still deny him admittance, though he came backed up by any amount of luggage. It was a free country.

where landladies could choose their own lodgers. In this case there was no very urgent need of money to impel them to consider the expediency of overlooking such a flagrant offence. It was only the uncertainty as to whether he deserved the reprimand ready on her lips had checked its utterance; she would be able to speak very plainly if justified in doing so beyond a doubt. In the meantime she would consult Nancy, the delinquent who had brought this embarrassment upon them. Putting two heads together would be an advantage, even if one were the flightiest in Christendom. Mrs. Scarrot might also join the conference, and, supposing this determined intruder to persist in his intention, it might also be wiser to allow her to bear the brunt of the encounter, she having age and experience to supplement her valour. The reflection that, if he were indeed the offender, he had probably only threatened to return to amuse himself with her alarm, or

with a view of beating a more dignified retreat, comforted her somewhat, and she had almost recovered her usual unruffled mien when she reached the highest landing.

‘Where have you been? I looked for you everywhere,’ was asked impatiently as she entered their tiny room, where Nancy was already established, seated tailor-fashion on the bed, and busily employed in recurling the feathers of her hat, which had severely suffered in the high wind.

‘I was in the upstairs sitting-room.’

‘With Sir Peter?’

‘No; the other room.’

‘What on earth were you doing there?’

‘Lalage! *What was that man like?*’

The vehemence of the counter-question startled her to whom it was addressed. The paper-knife she had been manipulating with some skill remained suspended in mid-air, and her colour heightened.

‘You don’t mean to say that it was really he who knocked at the door?’ she asked, letting each word drop at intervals one from another, as though aware of their full significance, her curiosity being also largely modified by awe.

‘That is just what I am trying to find out. Was he tall?’

‘I came up to his shoulder.’

‘Had he a heavy brown moustache, and horrid quizzical eyes?’

‘His moustache was brown—reddish brown, I think; but he had nice eyes, *very blue* ones. His hair was dark and very thick. I noticed it grew low down on his forehead and was parted in the middle.’

‘That’s him!’ cried Millicent, in depths of ungrammatical despair.

She sank down on the edge of the bed and let her hands fall loosely in her lap, wondering now how she could ever have given him the

benefit of the doubt, how she could have allowed the strong circumstantial evidence against him to be outweighed by so plausible an argument as that she had herself urged in his defence. It was more than unlikely that by mere coincidence anyone else should have come to see the rooms so soon after Nancy's adventure and at that time of the evening ; it was altogether improbable that without a motive he should have consented to take them at such a fancy price. She was compelled to admit that she had been won over by his pleasant manner and appearance, and that her opposition to his insistence had been of the very weakest. Before Nancy's direct gaze her own faltered ; she looked the guiltier of the two.

‘ Did you speak to him ? ’ was asked next.

Millicent nodded assent.

‘ I can't imagine how he had the assurance to do such a thing. What did he say ? ’

‘ I forget,’ faintly.

Nancy began to laugh.

‘ I don’t suppose he said anything at all. He would not dare. I never saw you look so angry as you did when you started to confront him ; and you know, Millicent, you have a very fine flow of eloquence when you are excited. I suppose he was crushed long before you came to the end of your first indignant tirade, and had only strength to gasp an apology and fly.’

This suppositional account was so utterly at variance with what had actually transpired, that Millicent could only bury her face in her hands and sob helplessly.

In a moment Nancy’s young arms were wound about her neck, and, all her warmth of sympathy aroused by such an unusual symptom of distress, she was assailing her with eager questionings. Had the wretch dared to insult her ? Was she ill ?

‘You are not vexed with *me*, dear?’ she finished pleadingly.

‘I am only vexed with myself. Nancy, I am not *fit* to take care of us both!’

‘Then let’s have a division of labour, darling. You shall look after me—and I dare say you’ll have enough to do; but the scheme has this advantage, that, having no care on my own account, I shall have heaps of time to look after you.’

Delighted at having brought a smile to Millicent’s sad lips, she went on blithely:

‘Consider yourself under my protection already, and tell me what it is you have been doing.’

Then everything was related, exciting breathless interest and no small surprise. To picture Millicent shorn of her pretty dignity, embarrassed and at a loss for words, utterly at the mercy of the enemy, was an excessive strain on her sister’s imagination, and she broke out

in the middle of the story in a most undisguised astonishment :

‘Do you mean to say you actually let him into the house and showed him the rooms ?’

‘I did not quite see how to refuse. He did not seem at all the sort of man who would be rude to a lady.’

‘I told you he was a gentleman,’ Nancy reminded her, with latent satisfaction ; then she added hesitatingly : ‘Well, he’s gone now, and all we can do is to be more careful in the future ; but do you know, Millie, I’m not sure it would be quite *proper* to have a young man in the house—even a well-behaved one.’

‘I never thought of that,’ sighed Millicent ; ‘and he *says* he’s coming back !’

‘What !’ cried Nancy, jumping to her feet.

When the rest of the story had been told, Millicent was relieved to find her latest

optimism shared, her hearer agreeing it was not likely that, under the circumstances, the man would return.

‘Though we ought to be prepared for him in case he should,’ she finished with decision.

And having in a measure transferred her onus of guilt on her sister’s shoulders, she took up instead the burden of arranging how its possible ill-consequences should be met and obviated, Millicent meekly accepting advice she had never formerly deigned to solicit.

After a discussion which lasted longer than they knew, it was agreed Mrs. Scarrot should be instructed to tell anyone who came that the rooms were previously let, and it was only by mistake they had been shown that afternoon.

‘One tells so many little stories for no cause whatever, it won’t matter for once to tell a big one with such good reason,’ concluded Nancy,

with easy morality, which Millicent reluctantly supported, and rang the bell to summon their confederate.

When five minutes had elapsed with no response she rang again—a clashing peal that resounded through the house and brought up the charwoman in nervous haste.

‘I am sorry to have kept you waiting, miss, but I was busy, and I thought——’

‘Never mind!’ exclaimed Nancy impatiently. ‘A gentleman who saw the ground-floor rooms this afternoon may return to take them, and if he does, we want you to tell him——’

She was interrupted in her turn.

‘The gentleman has come, Miss Nancy; I was helping him to put his things away when you rang. Such a heap of luggage, I don’t know where he’ll stow it all. But he’s a pleasant, civil-spoken gentleman, and he won’t need anything cooked to-night; he’s dining out.’

She stood there blinking. The sudden glare of gas on coming out of the darkness dazed and bewildered her, so that she did not notice their grave faces, nor the dead silence in which her communication had been received.

‘That will do, Mrs. Scarrot ; you can go,’ said Millicent, with an effort, at last ; and, when they were again alone, turned helplessly to her sister.

It was only with difficulty Nancy conquered her risibility : she had, in fact, almost lost sight of the seriousness of the case in the amusement she anticipated, when she caught sight of Millicent’s expression, and tried to compose one correspondingly distressed.

‘This is a disaster, of course ; but we must make the best of it, for there is no remedy, so far as I can see. It would not do to make a fuss, but at the end of the week we might give

him notice to quit ; that is the proper thing to do, is it not ?

‘ I suppose so. It is too annoying that he should have dared to drive us to such extremities ; it is *maddening* !’

Rising from her seat, Millicent threw back her head with a gesture of angry pride. Never had she been so deftly circumvented, so cunningly out-witted ; and the knowledge that it was her own absurd weakness and want of *savoir faire* that had made his victory easy did not tend to allay her irritation.

Nancy looked as serious as possible for as long as possible ; but one by one the dimples deepened in her cheeks, and her eyes were dancing with fun as she said demurely :

‘ *After all*, I rather admire him for not being frightened of you, and for getting his own way in spite of everything. Anyone can be impertinent on the spur of the moment, but he has carried the matter through with an audacity

that is almost sublime. I *must admire* him for *that*.'

To which there was no reply, Millicent having vanished, closing the door behind her with a little vicious bang.

CHAPTER V.

SIR PETER WAXES CONFIDENTIAL.

SIR PETER CAIRNE's health had certainly improved since his arrival in Marine Square. The fresh sea-air, though he had only inhaled it through the open windows, combined with the pleasant quietude, had had their good effect, and the excellent nursing he received also went far to restore him. Jaynes, whatever his concealed vices, was a first-rate valet, and his stealthy tread and noiseless movements, however uncanny they might be, were very grateful in a sick-room ; moreover, he had been in his present situation some years, and knew all his master's ways and wants.

Millicent and Mrs. Scarrot had vied with each other in preparing delicate little dishes that might tempt the invalid's appetite, and Nancy spent most of her time reading aloud or talking to him.

She went into his room one afternoon, and found him lying back in a chair, the room almost dark, the blinds being let down and their laths carefully closed.

'Are you going to sleep? Shall I come by-and-by instead?' she asked in a low voice, more calculated to soothe the hearer than arouse him if he felt inclined to go on dozing.

'By no means; you are most welcome,' was returned with alacrity.

She came into the room, and groped her way to the window, laughing as she stumbled against a chair and then a table.

'Is this gloominess your own or Jaynes' choice? I am afraid it is only becoming in

the sense that at night all cats are gray ; so shall I let in a little sunshine ?

‘ The brightest sunshine has entered by the door,’ he observed gallantly.

‘ I think you had better have a little outside light to see it by. There ! is not that much better ?’ pulling a cord and flashing in a stream of radiance almost blinding for the moment. When she had tempered this a little, and so arranged that the glare should not hurt his eyes, she took a chair beside him.

‘ Do you know, Sir Peter, I am very sorry for you ?’

‘ You are very amiable, Miss Nancy,’ his amusement apparent.

He had reached that age when selfishness, if present in a man’s character, has taken firm hold on him, so that no consideration for her feelings prompted him to conceal from her that he thought her own position infinitely the

more deserving of pity. This she was quick enough to discern.

‘Riches are not everything. Poor as we may be, we are not unhappy—Millicent and I. We have each other ; *you* have no one.’

‘I never felt the need of anybody. It would irritate me terribly to have a person about me who was only waiting to step into my shoes. The one embargo I have laid on the man who will inherit all I have is, that he should not live in the same town that harbours me. Heirs are like vampires : they feed upon your blood and thrive upon your sickness.’

‘You might’—doubtfully—‘feel like that with an outsider, not a near relation.’

‘I assure you, Miss Nancy, I am very contented as I am. Your sister makes me most comfortable ; I don’t know when I have been so comfortable before. My food is excellent. Jaynes is a treasure, though, of course, I do

not tell him so. As for you, you are my sunshine, as I said.'

'I like to be of use to you, and I have nothing else to do. Still, I cannot help thinking you would be happier if you had someone belonging to you—a daughter.'

He answered her with a quiet smile.

'I am afraid I was never domestic in my tastes. I have always preferred — other people's daughters. There is a spice of the old Adam left in me yet.'

'All that you have said has not altered my opinion in the least. I still think you must be very lonely, and I repeat I am very sorry for you,' maintained Nancy stoutly.

'Many thanks for your sympathy. It will be my endeavour to deserve it,' comically.

Expressing her disapproval of his levity by a dignified silence, the girl took up the book she was reading to him aloud, and opened it at the place where they had last left off. A pre-

liminary clearing of her throat betraying her intention, he broke in hastily :

‘ Not just yet, Miss Nancy. I would like to talk the matter out, and clear myself in your good opinion, if I can.’

She waited for him to go on, with an aggravating appearance of desiring to be persuaded he was right that made him push back his moustaches and twist them into fierce points while he went on impatiently :

‘ You are like the rest of your sex, and believe matrimony to be a panacea for every evil. I assure you it would be no pleasure to me, but the contrary, to have a family of grown-up sons and daughters about me. I wish to spend my last days in *peace*.’

‘ I dare say you do think as you say *now*, but if you had married years ago——’

‘ Who told you I never married ?’ he asked sharply, and left his opponent nonplussed.

‘I beg your pardon, Sir Peter,’ she said prettily.

‘There is no occasion ; you could not be expected to know. I did not display much sense in taking to myself a wife some twenty years younger than myself ; yet the world considered me most fortunate.’

‘Perhaps the world was right.’

‘You mean I may not have been capable of appreciating my good fortune. You are not the only one who has said so ; but that does not prove by any means that you are correct in your conclusions.’

‘Lookers-on are supposed to see most of the game,’ she reminded him nervously, feeling the awkwardness of the subject.

‘That is false !’ testily. ‘They only see one side—the side deliberately exposed to view, therefore calculated to deceive. They judge by appearance ; and my wife was very handsome, very rich, very charming ; *but——*’

Her sympathetic silence encouraged him to proceed, though the habit of self-repression was so strong with him that the words came with an obvious effort.

‘She did not *love* me!’ he broke out savagely, and bowed his head, as though stunned by the self-inflicted blow. The next moment he stood erect, determinedly banishing the theme alike from the conversation and his thoughts, the action reminding him painfully of his age and weakness, though he would not resume his seat until Nancy, with gentle tact, reopened her book and began to read.

A man may keep his heart’s anguish hidden from the world for years with Spartan-like fortitude, and yet in a moment of weakness betray it, at last, to the most unlikely person. Perhaps Sir Peter had shown more wisdom than at first sight was apparent in choosing Nancy for his confidant. Though she was sorry for him because he had suffered, she only

dimly understood his story, and had no more idea of the misery it presupposed than the schoolboy of fiction could fathom the depths of wretchedness and remorse which prompted Eugene Aram's confession of his crime in the thin veiling of a recounted dream. She supposed the wound of which he had spoken was an old one—the probabilities were that it was so—but it was evident that it still rankled, since he winced at a touch; therefore she judged it better to allow what she felt for him to remain unexpressed.

And he did not misinterpret her reticence. Without her knowledge, a tenderness crept into her voice as she read that told him she had not been unmoved; and as he listened his thoughts wandered, and he asked himself, not for the first time, whether he had not rejected the good in life, and deliberately chosen only to see the darker side, torturing himself thereby—as he had tortured another.

Nancy also was oblivious of the words that left her lips, so that it was a relief to both when an interruption came in the shape of a visitor announced by Mrs. Scarrot.

She put down her book and rose to go, but Sir Peter detained her to introduce his friend.

For a few moments Nancy, who was not shy, stood there leaning against a table, and looking up in the new-comer's face chatting unconcernedly, and with only that vague interest in the person she addressed which often is grudgingly doled out to those one meets for the first time, and is not likely to see again.

His bearing was military, and somewhat stiffly so, but with very little of that almost inevitable ingredient known as military swagger, which by most girls is admired. When she had grasped the fact that he was also no longer young, and that his expression was grave almost to severity, Nancy decided

he was not worth a second thought. To her most things furnished food for laughter, and she soon lost patience with those who by temperament or from force of adverse circumstances were of a different opinion ; moreover, the eyeglass, which since his first entrance had been fixed persistently upon her face, annoyed her beyond measure. It might have mollified her somewhat had she known with what intense interest she herself was regarded.

Colonel the Honourable Lancelot Fayrer, at that time commanding a battalion of the Guards, had lounged in from pure good-nature, having by merest chance heard Sir Peter Cairne was there, ill and alone. Their acquaintance had been of the slightest—made first in Egypt during the campaign, and subsequently cemented by meeting at their different clubs in town ; but he felt now that, with the hope of seeing Nancy Bell again, his visits to the invalid would be very frequent.

All natures being instinctively attracted by their opposites, the gay soft trills of laughter that some of Sir Peter's dry remarks evoked, the happy flow of words the presence of a stranger had no power to repress, bewitched him at once.

As a magnet draws to itself all iron, so she seemed to have concentrated all the brightness in the room in herself. The big gold spots that had struggled through the half-turned blinds lay upon her gown, and the ruddy coils of her rough hair, as though they loved to linger there ; the light shone full into her great gray eyes. She seemed the very spirit of radiance, and when caprice or some definite intention took her away, the whole place grew unaccountably dark as the sunbeams fell unnoticed on the floor.

With no intuition of the conquest she had made, and with no suspicion that he she had in a moment enslaved was an important item

amongst others which would form her life, the momentary sadness Sir Peter's confidence had excited was lost in immediate reaction, and Nancy had never been in wilder spirits than now, flying downstairs two steps at a time, and singing a song the echoes of which floated upward, and still further entranced ears that were strained to hear them.

Bursting into the kitchen, she found Millicent bending over the fire with a flushed and anxious face; but she looked round and smiled when Nancy entered, thinking how good it was to see the child so happy and to have her always there.

‘My dear!’ ejaculated Nancy in mock distress; ‘who on earth will ever marry you if you burn your eyes out of your head and lose your complexion!’

‘I have heard it said,’ pleasantly, ‘that for every woman one lover is provided by a

beneficent destiny. Mine, I foresee, will admire red cheeks and red eyes.'

'Only one lover each, and most of us so difficult to please!'

'That refers to the less fortunate. *You*, I dare say, will have enough and to spare.'

'And you?'

'I will do my best to console those you drive to desperation.'

'You may succeed beyond your expectation. I think you are a humbug, Millie. Do you seriously mean that you don't see that no one—*no one*—will ever look at me while you are by? Yes, I know'—impatiently putting up a small determined hand to stay her sister's speech—'I know my eyes are a little larger, and my nose a little straighter, and I have dimples which you have not, and perhaps a few other advantages with which I won't crush you just at present; but'—with impressive solemnity—'*I'm not an idiot.*'

‘ I have no desire to throw a doubt upon *anything* you have said,’ demurely.

Nancy had lifted herself on to the kitchen dresser, and was swinging her feet to and fro, her body, like her mind, being rarely quite quiescent. Her short upper lip shaped itself into an involuntary smile and showed the gleaming teeth beneath, as she went on suavely, embellishing her speech with sundry little gestures that were considered suitable to the sentiments expressed.

‘ We are like the two rivers in the song. *I* go splashing and dashing along, and do no damage to anyone. On your surface there is scarcely a ripple—that is because you are so deep. You flow along, oh ! so quietly, so softly, but it’s *you* should be marked “dangerous.” Though

“ I rin fast an ye rin slaw,
For ane man I droon, ye droon twa.”

Whatever virtues I lack, I must possess a

certain amount of generosity, or I should certainly be jealous of you, Millie. Some day I shall be fond of someone, madly fond of him, and he will be fond of you. I know this misfortune is impending, I feel it in the air, and yet——'

'I wish you knew something more to the purpose. Have you no idea whether a custard should boil or only simmer?'

'It all depends upon who it is for. If Sir Peter, I should err on the side of caution; if it is for *him*, I should let it boil—over.'

Their second lodger had proved most harmless, giving no trouble, and never obtruding himself upon their notice; yet he had not been forgiven by Millicent, and Nancy had gradually come over to her view of the question. It was decided that to-morrow, his first week being concluded, he should receive notice to quit at the end of the next, in spite

of Mrs. Scarrot's constant reports in his favour. His behaviour in the beginning had been too outrageous to overlook, and in any case the sisters were agreed that they must not receive young bachelors under their roof. Though there was no one in Brighton who cared whether they defied it or not, there was a feeling in the mind of both that propriety must be observed ; even Nancy, careless and happy-go-lucky as she was, did not dispute this.

‘Where is Mrs. Scarrot?’ she asked presently, being struck suddenly by the fact of her absence.

‘She has neuralgia very badly, and I sent her to lie down. By-the-bye, who was Sir Peter’s visitor? “A very fine gentleman,” she said, “who looked as if Brighton belonged to him.”’

‘There *was* an air of possessiveness about him,’ reflectively. ‘It was a Colonel Fayrer.

A soldier, of course. Looked as if he had been fed on ramrods from his birth, and as if, when you pulled a string, he would cry, "As you were!" He was at "attention" all the time. I have a crick in my neck with watching him,' clasping her pretty throat with an assumption of making sure the mechanism was not out of gear.

'Not a very interesting old man, apparently.'

'Not interesting at all; but I dare say he would not look so old if he dropped his eyeglass and came down from his stilts. As for his clothes, they were perfect, from his necktie to his boots. Even his hair looked as if it had been "ordered" and "fitted on." I am sure it was never allowed to *grow*—at least, not according to its own sweet will.'

The ringing of a bell resounded through the house, and caused Millicent to turn toward her sister, a startled inquiry in her eyes.

'Yes, it is *his* bell,' replied Nancy, a

Burleigh-like nod proving she was alive to the gravity of the situation.

‘Run and see if Mrs. Scarrot is awake. If she is, she won’t mind going. Quick!’

Nancy’s fleet feet carried her there and back in the shortest possible space of time, but she returned with no good news. The charwoman was so sound asleep, it had seemed cruelty to disturb her. With a regretful glance at the custard, which had displayed a most provoking inaptitude to gain its proper consistency, but would probably reach a critical point directly she deserted her post, Millicent made a movement to take off her apron. An eager hand caught hers and prevented her.

‘Let *me* go,’ was said persuasively.

The eyes of the two sisters met and lingered in their gaze. Millicent’s were full of doubt she hesitated to put into words; in Nancy’s could be read a rather shamefaced avowal of

former errors and present good intentions, betraying subsequently a feeling of hurt pride that was immediate in its effect.

‘Yes, go!’ spoke the elder girl softly.

Not for worlds would she have whispered any warning; she studiously ignored the fact that a fault had been condoned and renewed confidence declared in the permission given. Her whole attention was once more bestowed upon the custard difficulty, and she missed the opportunity of admiring Nancy’s elaborate primness of demeanour as, with a furtive settling of her hair and gown, she left the kitchen. When she came back she was still stiff and rustling with dignity, though her cheeks were a little reddened by excitement.

‘Well?’ asked Millicent, with an anxiety she felt it impossible to repress.

‘It was nothing. He only said he wanted dinner half an hour later. He was very

polite, and looked as if he had never seen me before.'

'And that was all?'

'All except that he hoped Mrs. Scarrot was not seriously ill. I reassured him on that point, and came away.'

At that moment the custard perceptibly thickened, and as she lifted it on to the hob, Millicent breathed a short, sharp sigh of relief not entirely caused by her culinary triumph.

CHAPTER VI.

LOVE.

WHEN the first week of his sojourn in Marine Square was ended, Leslie Wolffe resolutely looked his position in the face.

That in the beginning his coming there had been an unpardonable act of folly, to call it by no worse name, he readily admitted, not being prone to disguise facts by pretty phrases, and well aware that he deserved some animadversion for what he had done on the spur of an excited moment. He did not even attempt to defend himself at the expense of others. He was too generous to remember that one sister had, perhaps unconsciously,

encouraged his pursuit, or that the other, by an aggressive display of hostility, had stung him to retaliation. It was difficult to believe, on calmer reflection, that he had been the hero of this discreditable adventure, but he was naturally inclined to make more allowance for himself than he would have done for another under similar circumstances. It was his artistic tastes had led him to err in both instances, and surely no man could have fairer excuses to offer. By a jury of his own sex and age it would certainly be allowed that if he had sinned, it was under considerable provocation. Nancy, as she had fled from him through the Square, was a picture he had again and again tried to reproduce on paper; but Millicent's face he had never attempted to portray, though it filled his brain with a hundred possibilities, bewildering him with the beauty he could never hope to limn. The features might be delineated and set down one by one

in cold perfection; but the soul that lay slumbering in those deep gray eyes, the expression of tenderness mingled with disdain on the sweet red lips, who could render? And combined with his high admiration was a feeling of veneration, vague yet, but influencing him more than he knew, that forbade him to prove to his own intense satisfaction how much he remembered. Already it would have seemed a desecration.

There is in the minds of most men a high ideal, and when this is, or seems to be, realized, it has sometimes been that they have worshipped contentedly from afar, scarcely wishing to win what they adore, preferring to keep it so high and pure, so unattainable—a thing to dream of, not to desire.

It is only very poetic natures that are capable of the divine passion that Dante laid at the feet of Beatrice, by which he immortalized her, and caused her to live now

as she lived in those days at Florence; but an instinct that is faintly similar has been known to many. The

‘ Creature not too bright and good
For human nature’s daily food ’

is well enough for the work-a-day man, but is unworthy of the poet’s song or painter’s art, and seldom has inspired it.

Wolffe, who had hitherto not been exempt from the cruelty of his craft, and had used remorselessly such materials as had fallen in his way, thinking nothing too sacred to sacrifice to his art, for the first time hesitated and considered whether he had any right without permission to trace the lovely lines of a figure he had seen drawn up in haughtiest displeasure; whether it would not be absolutely brutal were he to depict her as he had seen her later, shamed and distressed, almost imploring his chivalrous consideration.

It might have warned him of the danger he was in had he paused to wonder why it was only in her case he had any such scruples ; but the ordinary Englishman is not given to self-analysis, and he had good cause to consider himself safe so far as his heart was concerned.

By no means is it invariably true that a burnt child dreads the fire ; indeed, when the adage is applied to love, it is generally the case that the very existence of deep scars imbues one with a treacherous self-confidence, and Leslie Wolffe believed he possessed a talisman against all new wounds in the memory of an old one.

Had anybody troubled to unearth all his pictures from where they lay neglected in different art emporiums, or hung unappreciated on some thrifty buyer's walls, in many might have been seen the same child-face, framed in golden hair, with clear blue eyes,

that, looking love, had never known of sorrow.

It was the mere prettiness of youth, with its rose-leaf colouring and pouting, smiling lips, yet to the man who never wearied of painting its unchanging sweetness it had been very dear ; and he had believed the best of life and all its happiness was over when only a few weeks before his wedding-day he had gazed upon the creamy eyelids closed in death, and kissed with passionate despair the mouth that would never speak to him again.

That was years ago, but remembrance was very vivid still, and had steeled him against numberless shafts that had sped in his direction, all the weapons in beauty's armoury—the witchery of glance, of touch, of words. It was not that he was less sensible to loveliness of every sort : his art and temperament alike forbade that it should be so ; it was only that women had lost their personality so far

as he was concerned—they were fair presentments on canvas or in stone, never living flesh and blood. No face had dwelt so persistently in his mind as that of Millicent Bell, perhaps because he had not lessened its haunting effect by transferring it to paper.

Again and again he had imagined how she would look when they met for the second time—sweet, intolerant, smiling like sunshine or frowning like soft clouds; but none of his fancies were fulfilled when at last she stood before him.

That very morning Mrs. Scarrot had laid his week's bill before him, and though he did not open it at once, he had been speculating whether he would continue paying terms he well knew had been meant to be prohibitive.

Not till the meal was ended and he had lit his cigarette did he break the envelope and glance carelessly at the total.

It was considerably less than he had ex-

pected, and a smile, in which was a strange tenderness as well as some amusement, stole across his face when he saw that the rooms themselves were put down at two guineas instead of five.

While he was considering what this concession might denote, a knock came to his door, and when he called out 'Come in,' Millicent herself entered.

What wonderful expression women can put into their clothes—how eloquent they can be in the wearing of them !

Before she opened her lips Wolffe understood this was no timid girl, not even an offended goddess, who confronted him, but the landlady, of unimpeachable demeanour, indisturbable calm.

So far as he could see, she wore the same black gown in which he had first seen her, yet its very folds, which were then artistic, hung differently, as though over a starched petti-

coat. They seemed to encase her in a coating of stern respectability ; while the severe plainness of her collar and cuffs spoke volumes of determined coldness. He remembered very clearly that a wisp of softest lace had encircled her throat that windy afternoon when Fate, in the fair shape of Nancy, had led him to their door.

‘I am pleased,’ he said, throwing away his cigarette, and speaking with most winning courtesy, ‘to have this opportunity of acknowledging how very comfortable you have made me.’

‘I am glad you have been satisfied,’ she answered quietly.

The chair he offered she refused.

‘I came to tell you,’ she went on, in the same even tones, not avoiding, yet not exactly meeting his glance, ‘that we have made other arrangements, and cannot keep you longer than this week.’

He looked all the surprise he felt, and some of the regret. There was always a great deal of boyishness in his manner, although over thirty years of age, and he spoke with a boy's impulsiveness now.

‘I hope you will reconsider that decision. I am so very comfortable, and if in any way I have been unsatisfactory as a tenant, you have only to tell me so, and I assure you——’

‘There is nothing that is in your power to alter. It is simply—we have made other arrangements,’ she repeated, as though saying a lesson.

Her quiet obstinacy drove him to desperation. It was not only that, as he said, everything suited him so exactly, but he felt now, stronger than ever, the inclination to struggle with her for supremacy and win; while the desire to remain in her vicinity was also growing. As diamond facets sparkling in the dark

have sometimes betrayed the whereabouts of the precious stone, so a sudden flash of intelligence illumined now the artist's puzzled brain and showed him clearly to what all this was tending, though the warning had no power to turn him from his intention.

‘You do not understand, perhaps, how important it is that I should remain. An artist is so dependent on his surroundings,’ he pleaded.

‘I am sorry.’

Her voice was very sweet. Wolffe had already decided it was the sweetest he had ever heard—so clear of *timbre*, so exquisitely soft and low—yet in its accent now could be discerned no sign of wavering; he felt its purpose was as irrevocable as though a silver bell had chimed the hour.

‘I shall never discover another place where I can be so quiet, so undisturbed,’ he continued.

‘There are more lodgings in the Square if you like this neighbourhood.’

‘Lodgings, yes ; but what sort of lodgings? Do you think I do not know that I shall not find elsewhere what I have found here? If you have not actually let the rooms to anyone else——’

He paused, waiting for her to answer what was intended for a question, but she was looking calmly past him. If at all softened by his entreaties, she did not show it in her face, nor in her manner, which was indifferent to a degree.

He went on with increased persuasiveness :

‘You have no idea how susceptible we are to outside influences. All these pretty things’—touching an embroidered screen, and then a vase filled with multi-coloured chrysanthemums and feathery ferns—‘help us in our work. May I,’ with a sudden inspiration, ‘show you the picture I am painting now?’

Anticipating her permission, he crossed over to an easel and lifted the drapery that hung over it.

On the stretched canvas was depicted the story of the banishment of Hagar ; but though Hagar herself should have been the central figure, it was not she who attracted first attention. It was the son of the bondwoman, the lad whose hand was to be against every man, every man's hand being against him—the prophesied father of a wild and outlawed nation—who was most powerfully drawn.

The half-clothed form—whose slenderness, rather than lack of height, declared his adolescence—was held defiantly erect ; the low brow, on which was stamped a darkling frown, in angry harmony with the resentment that flashed from his young eyes, betrayed that it was not with humility he accepted his dismissal ; while his lips were curled back in a scornful smile that showed his gleaming teeth,

and gave him the fierce look of a tiger that only hesitated to spring because he knew himself to be hopelessly over-matched.

In all this was undoubted genius. The fault that robbed the picture of its reality and life lay in the woman ; and here, too, was token of the faithfulness of Wolffe's affection for the pretty, tender-hearted child who won his heart so many years ago. Though the hair was dark, the features of an Eastern type, there was still a resemblance to the heroine of his other pictures.

In Hagar's face was no sign of wrath against her rival, no trace of that mocking spirit which had brought upon her this punishment, nor even of the contempt she might reasonably have felt for the patriarch who was powerless to protect her from his wife's malignant hatred. It was a tame submissiveness to the cruelty of her fate ; a dread of the unknown was most apparent in her expression,

which was also very sad, though with the sadness of an innocent, frightened child, not the deeper sorrow of a passionate woman who, having known the dear delight of love, is now compelled to taste its bitterness.

Something of what was lacking made itself dimly felt to Millicent, and was borne to the artist as he watched her.

‘It is a beautiful picture,’ she said.

‘But?’ he asked rallying.

‘I am sorry if my tone implied a “but.”’

‘You can atone for it, if you will, by telling me where lies the fault.’

‘I should not presume to criticise your work, even if it needed criticism.’

‘Perhaps I can read your thoughts. Hagar’s face has not sufficient force of feeling. It does not show the undisciplined nature which would rebel the more passionately because in losing love she lost all. In your opinion——’

Into Millicent's cheek stole the faintest colour, but she did not avert her eyes.

‘I had not time to study it so deeply,’ she interrupted him. ‘I merely thought she looked very young.’

When she turned away and began arranging the breakfast things to take them away, the artist's first impulse was to help her; but he refrained, feeling certain she would prefer it to be taken for granted that she was equal to the task she had undertaken.

Furtively, without her knowledge, he watched her, thinking, as he affected to be busy with his brushes, how, like Enid, she was ‘sweet and serviceable,’ and could infuse into the most ordinary actions the daintiest grace; while, like Geraint, he

‘Had longing in him evermore
To stoop and kiss the tender little thumb
That crost the trencher as she laid it down.’

When she moved with her heavily-burdened

tray towards the door he allowed himself the small pleasure of opening it for her, receiving her gently-spoken thanks.

After she had gone and the echo of her footsteps had died away, he occupied himself in wondering whether she would come back or send her sister or the old woman who had hitherto attended to his wants; and again, whether it would be wise, if she reappeared, to make one more appeal to her pity, or whether to let her enjoy for awhile the satisfaction of having triumphed before attempting to shake her resolutions.

He thought he understood her reasons for requesting him to leave. From incoherent sentences dropped by Mrs. Scarrot, he guessed that it was not only on account of his first offence, but more because he was a bachelor and young, while they were both unchaperoned, that his departure was considered advisable. And now, glancing down at the bill, which all

this time he had held unconsciously in his hand, a sudden idea struck him.

Drawn up on approved principles with considerable care, it was headed :

‘ Mr. Wolffe, debtor to M. Bell,’

and the initial being written with a fashionable flourish and with a loop to the third stroke—a trick she had acquired in writing German character — could easily be taken for the abbreviation which marks the married woman.

A suspicion that it was admiration for herself which made him desirous to stay on would be, he knew, the signal for his instantaneous dismissal ; but if he practised a little diplomacy and appeared anxious merely on account of his picture she might even now relent—especially if she believed him unaware of the fact that *les convenances* were disregarded by his remaining.

While he debated this in his mind she

returned, and so quietly he never knew she was there until quite near, and she had passed by him with an air of being oblivious of his propinquity that awoke a keen and mischievous wish to ruffle her annoying calm, even at the cost of her displeasure.

With an admirably assumed expression of perplexity he held out the bill for her inspection.

‘Is this a mistake, Mrs. Bell, or was I wrong in thinking you asked five guineas for the rooms?’ he asked, pointing to the item.

Over the milky whiteness of her brow and throat there spread a crimson flame. For one moment she flashed into his face an indignant protest against his cruelty in pressing such a question; then, with an effort that was obvious, recovered her composure.

‘The bill is quite correct,’ she returned haughtily, and moved back to the table.

He dared not speak to her again, and

during the few moments she was in the room he was only permitted to see the soft coils of hair gathered together loosely at her neck, and the sweep of her black gown as she flitted to and fro. Then, without a glance in his direction, she left, and left him more than ever determined to stay where he was, whatever happened and by whatever means.

CHAPTER VII.

JEALOUS.

A SOLEMN council of three assembled to discuss the letter which Wolffe sent down the following morning with the payment of his week's bill. As he had with considerable acumen foreseen, Millicent was well satisfied at first with her own conduct—the firmness she had displayed in insisting that he must go ; it was during the night reflection raised a doubt whether she had not been more than abrupt with him, absolutely rude.

If the place suited him, and congenial surroundings were so essential to his work's progress as he had declared, it was a cruelty

to turn him away ; and, so far as their own interests were concerned, was it wise ? They would never get a less troublesome lodger ; they might get no one in his place at all.

Now for the second time she read his letter aloud :

‘DEAR MADAM,

‘I trust you will not think me obtrusive in writing to ask you once more to reconsider your decision of yesterday. I should be loath in any case to move from such pleasant quarters, but just now I am exceedingly busy with the picture which you saw—a commission I am bound to finish by a certain date—so that it is more than ever important I should remain where I can work without difficulty and with no fear of being disturbed. Gathering from what you said that the rooms I occupy are not yet promised to anyone else,

I venture to request that you will at least allow me to stay here so long as it is not actually inconvenient to yourself; and I, on my part, will hold myself in readiness to turn out at a moment's notice, should circumstances require it.

‘Yours truly,

‘LESLIE WOLFFE.’

‘It’s a nice letter, Miss Millicent. I don’t see how you can refuse him,’ commented Mrs. Scarrot, always leniently disposed towards the offender.

A little had been told her of the incident which had preceded the artist’s arrival, and something she had guessed—enough to make her anxious he should remain. Honestly fond of her young mistresses, like all her class she had a notion that marriage was the goal towards which they should be striving, and was anxious that one, at least, should escape

from the discomfort and uncertainty of this present way of living.

Sir Peter she had long ago dismissed from her thoughts as a possible husband ; but this second lodger, who was young and apparently not badly off, should not be sent away if she could help it.

Millicent looked doubtfully at Nancy.

‘We decided,’ she said slowly, ‘that we had better have only ladies.’

‘That would mean another servant at once,’ said the charwoman sharply. ‘I know what ladies are in lodgings : it’s ringing the bell all day long, and endless trouble and worry, besides which, they’re none such good pay.’

‘If it were a lady had the rooms, we could do so much more to help ; and if they were permanently let, we could afford to keep a housemaid too.’

‘You may not let them at all,’ put in Nancy.

It was the first time she had volunteered an opinion, and the words came as a surprise, showing as they did that her sympathies, too, were with their second lodger.

‘It was you,’ broke in Millicent reproachfully, ‘who first suggested we ought not to take in any bachelors.’

‘That was when the choice was still open to us. Now that he is here, quite unobjectionable and so anxious to remain, I can’t think it necessary to send him away.’

‘Mr. Skene thought it quite impossible we could allow him to stay on.’

‘Mr. Skene is jealous. Of course, if you mean to listen to him——’

‘I don’t mean to listen. It is nothing to me what he says or thinks ; but, all the same, I doubt if he is not right in this,’ said Millicent.

She was blushing as she spoke—not at Skene’s name and implied interest in her pro-

ceedings, but at the imputation, very galling to her pride, that there could possibly be cause for jealousy where this stranger was concerned.

Nancy threw back her head impatiently.

‘Who on earth cares what we do? Who has the right to care?’

‘Who would know?’ asked Mrs. Scarrot timidly.

‘He would know himself, and think it strange,’ answered Millicent, a painful doubt in her deep gray eyes.

Very vaguely she was feeling that this mere fact alone would be inimical to her peace of mind. Always he had seen her at a disadvantage; it was more than likely he would disapprove the action to which he was even now urging her, a man being never the less hard on a woman’s error because in a measure responsible for its committal.

She even began to imagine the cynical

gleam in his blue eyes when he found that he had won another victory over her weakness.

All the time she was twisting the envelope of his letter idly between her fingers, and her downcast eyes suddenly caught sight of the superscription. It was addressed to *Mrs. Bell*.

She hurriedly pointed out the fact to Nancy and Mrs. Scarrot. By the first it was taken as an unanswerable argument in favour of matters remaining as they were, since the proprieties were seemingly observed, and this had been the only real objection; while the old charwoman, nervously brushing invisible crumbs from her apron, remarked rather enigmatically that it was 'as clear as daylight now.'

'You know you can look very married when you like,' declared Nancy cheerfully.

Perhaps her sister considered this a left-handed compliment, for her countenance did not lighten.

‘Why is he so anxious to remain?’ she broke out petulantly.

‘Because he is comfortable, and knows it. He likes his food, in fact; you and Mrs. Scarrot are always concocting dainty dishes, and the man in him is not proof against them. I suppose woman is the only animal devoid of ‘cupboard love.’

Nancy’s explanation brought a smile to the charwoman’s pallid, melancholy features, and Millicent, too, was relieved by her laughing unconcern. It was principally on her sister’s account she had hesitated, being uneasily aware of a suppressed eagerness in her tone, while seeming to be neutral. Now she was somewhat reassured.

So long as Nancy was safe, there was no other danger, she told herself, with a scornful curling of her lip. Indeed, it had been a humiliation to her pride to suspect that Nancy, child as she was, could so far forget her dignity

as to think of the artist in any other light than that of lodger. She was glad to put the thought away, with a feeling of shame that it had ever been entertained.

Without further demur, she agreed to send a message to the effect that Mr. Wolffe might consider the notice to leave withdrawn, but must, on his side, be prepared to keep to his promise of going whenever his departure should be desired—a message that afforded the recipient unbounded satisfaction, and caused him to plume himself upon the diplomacy he had practised.

It chanced that Mark Skene called that afternoon, and found only Millicent at home.

She was nervous and constrained, and talked incessantly, to keep him from the one subject that she was more than unwilling to discuss.

Never before had he seen her so unrestful,

and gathering from her pallor that there might be some reason for it, he asked solicitously if she were only tired or unwell.

She protested she was neither.

‘Then unhappy—about Nancy, about money matters?’ he persisted, in his quiet, drawling tones.

‘That less than anything,’ she answered hastily, alarmed because, in this game of ‘mental’ hide-and-seek, he was getting, as the children say, ‘hot.’ Then the feeling that his slow inquisitive gaze would not be withdrawn until she had given some explanation, forced from her lips: ‘It is want of fresh air, perhaps; I have not been out lately.’

‘Then come now.’

‘There is only Mrs. Scarrot in the house.’

‘She will be equal to emergencies for once. You must not trifle with your health; that is the worst economy.’

‘I am never ill.’

‘Which is something to boast of in the past, not to rely on in the future. Come!’

Still she resisted; more because it was he who asked than because she was averse to going out.

‘It looked like rain, I thought, when I stood at the door an hour ago.’

‘Then the outlook is not what it was; it is a clear, frosty day, scarcely a breath of wind, and the sun quite warm for the time of year.’

‘The sun will be setting soon,’ looking at the clock.

‘Why not say at once you do not wish to come?’ he asked angrily.

‘Do you think I should hesitate to do so, if it were true?’ smiling.

When Millicent smiled she was irresistible.

Her well-cut features, that in repose seemed cold, were suddenly bathed in a bewildering glow of warmth and colour, her red lips, part-

ing, displayed a gleaming line of pearly whiteness, and in her deep gray eyes sparkled golden lights.

Millicent was often statue-like in appearance; it was only those who knew her well who could speak to her intense womanliness, the tenderness of her heart, its powers of sympathy. Now, aware that she had been ungracious, she hastened to atone, and leaving Mr. Skene no time to reply, expressed her intention of accompanying him.

She was gone only a moment, and returned declaring herself ready to do ten miles at least, laughing at rather a dismayed look she fancied she detected in Skene's face, the actual existence of which he, however, strenuously denied.

They walked down the Marine Parade to King's Road, ultimately reaching the New Pier, where a band was playing, and Skene persuaded her to go on, choosing a sheltered seat where she could rest without feeling cold,

and establishing himself beside her in close proximity.

Millicent, always pretty enough to attract attention, was looking particularly sweet in dark furs and a small black velvet bonnet, whose strings were tied coquettishly beneath her chin, and several glances wandered in her direction.

The bright weather—such weather as only Brighton knows in winter—had brought a number of people out, and Skene amused himself noticing those who passed by, confiding his views concerning them to his companion in discreet undertones.

He could be very entertaining when he chose, and Millicent grew interested, and responded merrily to some of his happiest remarks.

To an outsider it must have seemed that they were on the closest terms of intimacy, and someone who was passing involuntarily

started, and was conscious of a sense of displeasure and disappointment. The next moment, in acknowledgment of Millicent's slight bow, he raised his hat.

'Who is that?' asked Skene, intense curiosity in his tone.

'It is Mr. Wolffe; the gentleman who took the ground-floor in our house.'

The searching glance she knew was on her face helped her to keep it impenetrable and composed; only the most critical observer might have guessed that the very absence of expression denoted some strong feeling.

She rose from her seat, not wishing to be there still when Wolffe passed next time. Already he had turned and was coming towards them.

'It is cold; it is getting late!' she exclaimed, hurrying in the direction of the gate.

‘ You mean you wish to go ? ’ he corrected calmly.

‘ Why not ? I gave two reasons for my wish.’

‘ A woman might give a hundred reasons, and not a true one.’

He spoke good-humouredly and as if without ulterior intention, but Millicent bit her lip and a colour came into her cheeks.

Passing out, they walked some way without speaking, and the keen air they met—not strong enough to be called a breeze, yet laden with the freshness of ozone, and full of soothing force that impressed itself on the senses—combined with the murmuring of the sea as it washed the shore in languorous monotony of music, restored to Millicent her equableness of temper.

She was even ready to recognise the right Skene might have as their only friend, and a

declared favourite of their father's, to show an interest in their doings and offer his advice. When he spoke she listened patiently, as to one who has a claim to be heard, he not failing to see that she was looking at the matter now from another different point of view, yet profoundly ignorant as to why she had veered round.

‘Is it—is it——’ he began awkwardly.

‘It is the man who followed Nancy,’ she confessed.

‘And he is with you still? I thought he was to leave.’

‘I gave him notice to go yesterday, but at his repeated requests withdrew it.’

‘Why should he be so anxious to remain?’ sharply.

It was the same question that had puzzled herself to answer that very morning, and now she was as little capable as then of answering it with any certainty.

‘He says he is very comfortable; that he finds it easy to paint where he is; in fact, that it would be extremely inconvenient to move just now. He is finishing a picture—a commission.’

‘You believe all that nonsense?’

Not even the secret conviction that all these excuses were the very weakest and most inadequate, nor even the faint doubt as to their truth which may have been apparent in her own voice, justified, in Millicent’s opinion, Skene’s retort.

Her great gray eyes were ablaze with indignation as she turned on him.

‘I consider everyone deserving of belief till proved untruthful. Mr. Wolffe is a gentleman; his conduct while with us has been irreproachable.’

‘Whatever it may have been before?’ disagreeably.

She bowed her head.

Again they walked on in silence, she with her face turned towards the sea, drinking in eagerly its salt scent, never tired of seeing the waves come in with high white crests, proudly as conquerors—dying in defeat. Having lived on the coast only so short a time, the novelty was still unworn. As passionately as ever she revelled in the sense of space and power the ocean conveyed to her: the beauty of its ever-varying movement, the magic of its mysterious sounds. She had lost the thread of their argument in deeper, if undefined thought, and started when next Skene addressed her:

‘Your sex is so proverbially one-sided in argument that probably I am only wasting my breath if I remind you that a man does not often deliberately show his worst side to women. *You* cannot possibly judge from what you have seen. He may be a murderer without murdering you; a robber without

taking anything of value from your house. I have seen something of the world, and it would require something more than negative proofs to assure me that this artist was a desirable acquaintance for you or for your sister.'

'He is a lodger merely. If he pays his rent and behaves with ordinary civility, it is all we can require.'

'I do not think so. As you have adopted this way of earning money, at least use ordinary caution. Find out who he is, what he is, before acceding to his request. Let me make inquiries—let me see him for you.'

'Thank you. The matter is already settled. I have promised that he shall remain—for the present, at any rate,' she interrupted him.

He ejaculated something indistinctly that testified to his impatience at her folly, for folly it seemed to him, and that of a most

glaring sort. Almost he suspected her of being led into it by personal feeling, a predilection for the artist's good looks and pleasant manners, a thought that it might not be well to turn an eligible from their door. But one look into her pure cold face disarmed him, and involuntarily he began to apologize.

‘It is because I care so much what happens to you that I have interfered. Forgive me if in my great zeal I overstepped all bounds.’

‘Think no more of it,’ she adjured him sweetly.

She was looking all the better for her walk, or perhaps it was the discussion had given her so much colour. There was a dewy moisture in her eyes, and a rich bloom lying on her cheeks that spoke of splendid health; and the short fringe that curled back from her forehead lay in soft rings on the velvet of her bonnet like threads of light. Her figure was well poised and lissom—it seemed

to follow natural lines instead of those imposed by fashion ; and every movement was free and undulating, not fettered by clinging skirts, nor made awkward by high heels. She looked a very ‘ perfect woman, nobly planned,’ a goddess grand and gracious, yet with all the winsome unaffectedness of a child, its waywardness and fancies.

Skene’s desire to win her grew as he gazed. The fear that another might be eager to supplant him made him speak again at the last moment on the doorstep, the door being open, and Mrs. Scarrot on the threshold.

‘ Let the man go,’ he pleaded ; ‘ it is not worth the risk, the—the annoyance.’

Millicent shook her head and smiled, refusing to reopen the discussion.

‘ Good-bye. I enjoyed my walk immensely,’ she called out gaily as he went.

‘ Don’t heed him, Miss Millicent,’ put in the charwoman, following her downstairs. ‘ He is

jealous ; Miss Nancy said so, and she sees as much as anyone. It puzzles me sometimes where I have met Mr. Skene—before ever he came here. I know his face quite well, and his voice.'

'You've been dreaming about him,' said Millicent, with a careless laugh.

Mrs. Scarrot lived in the air half her time ; nothing but a sharp attack of neuralgia, or the exigencies of her responsible position as 'woman of all work,' brought her down to earth. She accepted the solution with stolid good-humour.

'No doubt you're right, miss. Sleeping and waking is all mixed up like in my head sometimes, and it's hard to say where the dreams begin and where they end. It's a queer world, anyhow.'

To which Millicent absently assented.

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER ESCAPADE.

THE ménage at Marine Square had settled down into ordinary routine, and what had seemed a difficulty soon became an accepted and not unpleasant fact. Millicent's idea of having another servant was abandoned, as Mrs. Scarrot professed herself able to do all that Mr. Wolffe required, and Sir Peter had his own attendant, between whom and the charwoman there had been from the first a smouldering feud. She had characteristically declared herself willing to do his work as well as her own, rather than have him 'creeping about her kitchen like an ill-conditioned

ghost,' and had set her face against his using it as a resort in hours of leisure. The two girls, who shared her dislike, were not sorry that she was resolute on this point, and that it was in consequence only seldom he invaded their territory.

Jaynes might be the most estimable man alive, experience and Madame Tussaud having taught us that the incipient iniquity of criminals is not always 'written on their foreheads,' but his appearance was decidedly against him, and women are always prone to judge by an appearance.

Nancy, who was light-hearted and careless, and found it less trouble to be leniently than critically disposed, was the least severe upon him, the impulse which would have led her to throw dainties to the mangiest cur prompting her to speak to him encouragingly and with smiles ; she also saw him more frequently, and perchance had discovered that he was by

no means so black as nature had painted him. However it might have been, there was, if no amity, at least no enmity between them, and he showed no jealousy of the increasing influence she was gaining daily with his master.

Sir Peter, with the selfishness of an invalid, seemed to have no scruple in monopolizing her time, and, indeed, Nancy responded so willingly to his calls that it never entered his head he might be imposing on her goodness. She had a very sweet voice, and though quite untrained, it rendered very charmingly the simple ballads which her listener preferred; she also read aloud with intelligence and feeling, and would sit and chat with him for hours and never tire, her hands folded idly in her lap, her head slightly on one side in an attitude of attention, and eyes uplifted to his face in evident sympathy with all he had to say.

Nancy never worked. It was popularly supposed she did not know how to thread a needle ; certainly she could never have guided it through the numberless intricacies of design in which some women delight, and she had neither the neatness nor perseverance requisite for plainer sewing. She had no ‘eyes in her finger-tips,’ as Millicent might be said to possess, and inherent laziness precluded her feeling the want of occupation. When there was nothing to incite her to action she could be well content to sit in idleness, dreaming or doing nothing.

Colonel Fayrer had fulfilled his intention of prosecuting his acquaintance with the retired Indian officer, and several times Nancy had encountered him. He was too stilted, too affected, to please the girl’s fancy at first. His slowness of speech exasperated her, as also the deliberate way he fixed his eyeglass for closer contemplation of herself.

There was nothing genial nor of exuberance in his manner, and the dry witticisms for which he was somewhat celebrated she was too young to appreciate; perhaps he was not always capable of uttering them in her presence. When he first made his appearance in Marine Square she had set him down as a contemporary of Sir Peter's, and in contrast with her intense vitality and joyousness, he himself felt that he was old and dull, this, too, preventing him from showing to best advantage. Though not a ladies' man in the fullest acceptance of that term, being of good family with a fair private income to supplement his pay as colonel of the guards, he had always been sought after as an eligible, and Nancy's habit of ignoring that he had anything to recommend him to her notice amused almost as much as it annoyed him.

She did not even take the trouble to be rude to him. He felt that it was simply

because he bored her that she took the occasion of his arrival to slip out of the room with a smiling assurance that she would return, on the strength of which slight promise he had once or twice prolonged his visit beyond all reasonable limits, though he was beginning to understand that he must not take her words too literally.

‘I am afraid I drive you away,’ he said one afternoon, as after five minutes’ conversation she edged towards the door.

‘Not possible,’ she returned, with a child-like gaiety that took from all she said and did even the semblance of impertinence or boldness. ‘Nobody ever makes me do anything against my will, do they, Sir Peter?’

‘I am an invalid, you know, and cannot judge.’

‘Is that a suggestion of brute force? How ungallant! how foolish, too! Not even that would break a woman’s will.’

‘Oh, you are all as obstinate as mules, I know, but——’

‘We prefer to call it *firmness*,’ she interpolated.

‘But,’ he went on, with a twinkle in his eye, ‘some day you find your masters. I look forward to the advent of yours, Miss Nancy.’

‘May the man prove merciful to his beast!’ she laughed.

‘You are not taking it seriously, I am afraid; you think you can rise above your fate—drive and not be driven. You want a slave——’

The guardsman was understood to murmur that even slavery might be a proud position; but Nancy, avoiding his admiring gaze, made a mutinous mouth, escaping further strictures and compliments alike by a retreat.

As she passed the artist’s door she found it wide open, and went in to put his room in

order. It had been her custom to do so from time to time, Mrs. Scarrot's hand being too heavy for such delicate work ; but she drew back when she saw Wolffe himself standing before his easel brush in hand.

He heard the slight rustling of her skirts, and when he turned she felt compelled to explain her presence.

‘I did not know you were here,’ blushing brightly.

‘Pray come in,’ he said courteously.

‘I only wanted to arrange your things. Some other time will do.’

‘No time like the present. It is very good of you to take such trouble. I often wondered to whose deft fingers I was indebted.’

‘Mrs. Scarrot——’ she began.

‘Mrs. Scarrot is as good as gold, but if I were entirely dependent on her tender mercies, I should find my wet brushes heaped together on my favourite books, and letters and

sketches hopelessly mixed up. Myself, I have no idea of neatness.'

'Genius always refuses to be trammelled by ordinary laws of method and of order.'

'Then I am only within my rights. I am so glad you think so.'

He laughed as he spoke, and she laughed too. She had come farther into the room, and was craning her neck to see past him where on the strained canvas something was indistinctly shadowed.

'What is it?' she asked with sudden awe in her eyes.

'The ghost of my great-grandmother,' he returned, smiling down at her in an indulgent semi-paternal fashion.

She frowned and drew up her head in a way that reminded him of her sister, and recalled to him the fact that, young as she looked, she was a woman, and would resent being treated as a child.

‘It is the merest sketch, a fancy only,’ he supplemented hastily.

‘And you think I could not understand nor sympathize.’

‘You could do more,’ impulsively.

She had stolen a little nearer, and with brows still bent, though not in anger now, was scrutinizing carefully the faint outlines that scarcely yet indicated the subject.

‘It is an angel,’ she hazarded—‘without wings and flying.’

‘An anomaly, in a word.’

‘My way of expressing myself was Irish, I admit, but——’

‘That all angels do not fly away one should be very grateful,’ taking mischievous delight in her embarrassment.

‘It is allegorical, of course. I understand that,’ still rather hurt and pouting.

‘To tell the truth, I scarcely know what it is myself. The subject just escapes me.’

‘What did you mean when you said I could do more than sympathize?’ Nancy asked shyly.

‘I was talking wildly. The fault of genius again,’ he said evasively. ‘Must you go?’ as she turned to leave the room.

Half-way towards the door she looked back over her shoulder, the wish to remain unmistakable in her speaking eyes.

‘Don’t move, don’t move!’ he implored her excitedly, his taste charmed by the attitude, everything else forgotten in his art. ‘It is the embodiment of my idea. That is how you could help me if you chose.’

‘By standing like this? How long?’

She had remained motionless as he had desired, but a sense of something unconventional and unusual in the situation caused a faint colour to mount into her cheeks and her white lids drooped, her lashes lying like a heavy shadow across her half-closed eyes.

‘It is perfect,’ he cried enthusiastically. ‘If you would remain like that ten minutes even, I could complete my sketch.’

‘I will stay as long as you like,’ she answered simply.

Hastily arranging his materials within reach, he set to work; and Nancy proved herself a very docile model, only shifting her gaze, and this ranged freely. All the different objects in the room were familiar to her, yet gained fresh interest now that he was in their midst and she was able to survey them under this new condition. Visiting-cards, notes of invitation, and documents that looked like bills, were thrown together in a heap, and a half-smoked pipe that had been hastily laid down spoke to his Bohemian habits. Whether or no the choice of books was any index to his bent of mind, Nancy noticed at once that Tennyson’s ‘*Idylls of the King*,’ replaced ‘*Prince Lucifer*’ by Alfred Austin, which she

remembered to have seen before on a small table near his easy-chair ; and the leaves lying flat showed that it had been well perused. In 'Sandra Bellona' was a metal book-marker that proved to Nancy he had some difficulty in keeping his place. 'Even *men* find George Meredith a little heavy,' she thought complacently, she herself preferring novels in a lighter strain, and unwilling to observe more intellectuality in the tastes of others.

She was ready to admit, however, that there was decided power in the artist's broad low forehead ; that, on the whole, he seemed more than ordinarily clever—more interesting, certainly, than anyone she had met before. Having plenty of time to consider the matter exhaustively, she decided that in every way he favourably compared with Colonel Fayrer and Mark Skene, the only other *young* men who had lately crossed her path. He had neither swagger nor pretension of any sort,

but was unmistakably a gentleman and had a masterful way with him, and an air of having always succeeded that circumstances did not combine to justify. 'Yet he is not a bit good-looking,' she mentally decided—'not a bit.'

'Are you not getting tired?' asked Wolffe, turning round.

'Not very.'

An assertion that her appearance denied. Wolffe laid down his brushes and with a gesture released her from the strained position.

'I do not know how to thank you enough; you have been of inestimable service.'

'May I see? Oh, how very pretty!' naïvely, as the picture met her view.

'Not half pretty enough. If only——'

'Would you like me to come again?'

'If you would.'

'I will with pleasure. I consider I am

godmother to this picture and responsible for its success.'

He began to explain to her what he intended. The flying feet that sped reluctantly, as was expressed by the backward glance (the poise of the whole figure betraying how much was left behind), were meant to represent the passing to an unknown future from a happy past—the merest sketch, yet full of suggested grace, and with clear resemblance to herself.

'Going, yet looking back,' said Nancy softly.

'Exactly. That is just what I meant to convey. Do you know, I think you are a *fairy* godmother, and that the child you have adopted will make a name for herself and me. It is the first time I have been satisfied with my trial sketch of any picture.'

And then it was arranged that at the same time the following day Nancy should come again.

‘That is, if your sister does not object,’ put in Wolffe, a remembrance coming over him of Millicent’s proud face and invulnerable coldness towards himself.

‘I think we had better not tell her anything about it at present. We will confess what we have done *after we have done it.*’

Her face was still radiant with pleasure at his praise, while a determined lifting of her chin seemed to claim him as a fellow-conspirator, and a suspicion of laughter deepened the lurking dimples in her cheeks, betraying how she thoroughly enjoyed the escapade.

Believing that Millicent would most likely refuse her consent, Wolffe was conscious of an uncomfortable feeling that he should not be acting fairly or well towards her if, without her knowledge, he did what she would disapprove. Having entered her house against her will, stayed in it by dint of continued entreaty, he was the more bound to consider

her wishes. He had looked to Nancy, expecting confirmation of this vague impression, and was rather taken aback when she deliberately preached defiance.

For a moment he hesitated, though strongly tempted to accede to her proposition, aware that only so would his picture become what he imagined it already in his mind. And, after all, it was Nancy who should decide; she knew her sister best, and could judge how far she might go without causing irremediable offence. It was certainly she who should decide, and Wolffe, in agreeing, told himself that he assumed no responsibility at all.

Yet when he was alone, though the picture still occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of most other subjects, two deep gray eyes haunted him and spoilt all his pleasure in his work—not Nancy's eyes, laughing and alluring, but Millicent's, gravely severe and full of the pathos of reproach.

CHAPTER IX.

MISUNDERSTANDING.

AND for many days, though he had the artist's true enthusiasm and soon became absorbed in the work that grew like magic beneath his fingers, promising to be a greater success than even he had hoped, Wolffe found the one image constantly recurring, obstinately refusing to be banished for any time. His landlady's face—calm, haughty, or imploring—came between him and his picture, causing everything to seem unreal and indistinct in contrast with such vivid life. For every feature was wonderfully defined, every line strangely familiar, as though conned from

childhood ; it was as if he had always known her, or always waited for her coming. That other dream-face, the fancy of a few years past, faded into nothingness ; the blue eyes and golden hair of his first love were drowned in the dull waters of that Lethean river whereon so much that has been precious is allowed to drift away at last without regret.

It seemed to him now a wonder that he had not realized at the very moment of their meeting that Millicent was the one woman in the world for him. He was surprised that even then, the fact being still unadmitted to himself, it had not been conveyed to her by some lightning-flash of electricity ; the ardour of his glance, his manners in her presence (audacious only in desperation), a hundred signs, must have been apparent, had she cared to see.

But that she was utterly indifferent he could not doubt ; indeed, all the feeling she had dis-

played had been antagonistic, and she gave him no opportunity of removing an impression that must have been unfavourable.

She had never entered his room since the day she had criticised his picture of Hagar, though he had kept it back beyond the specified time, hoping to show how much it had gained by the touches her words had suggested. Once or twice he had met her in the passages, when she had flitted by with a most distant bow, and only once he had met her out of doors, when she had been with someone who had roused his fiercest jealousy by the earnestness of his manner and the good looks Wolffe was too generous not to grant. He himself seldom went out until the evening. While the light lasted he worked at his painting, seldom stirring out of his rooms, which opened one into the other.

He did not even know if he were the sole male inmate of the house. He opined not,

having seen a man's hat hanging in the hall—though this might be a feminine ruse he had heard was often practised, so as not to seem unprotected to the outside world—while once or twice he had caught a glimpse of someone wearing coat and trousers ascending the flight of stairs that led to a higher floor, and a heavier footstep than Mrs. Scarrot's sometimes passed his door.

A few questions to the charwoman would have elicited any information he desired, but he felt that to seek what was not voluntarily accorded by themselves would be an intrusion on the privacy the sisters might wish to maintain, and, if his question were repeated, he could only sink lower in Millicent's esteem.

Some day he might win her confidence, and she might of her own free will tell him all about herself and her affairs; in the meantime, he would work hard at the picture he

believed would make his fame, and establish some claim on her respect.

He had secured a professional model, and Nancy managed to go to him nearly every afternoon to sit for a short time, so that it made rapid progress ; their acquaintance, too, progressed with rapid strides.

There was nothing of conventionality about Nancy, nothing of affected prudery. When she liked anyone, she showed it frankly, without thinking it necessary to enwrap herself in that thin veiling of indifference which women sometimes adopt more as a provocative than as a defence. Yet always she was so childlike in her candour that the veriest boor could not have misinterpreted her manner or presumed upon it. The mistake Leslie Wolffe made was of a different nature.

It was because she was so transparent that he believed her liking for himself, which he could not fail to see, a mere whim, a fancy

that would fade away, as do the rootless plants we are sometimes cheated into buying in Mayfair, 'all a-blowing and a-growing' to-day, and dead to-morrow. He took it so little seriously, that he never thought of demonstrating to her that it could not be returned, nor even of treating her with a little wholesome neglect.

She was the sister of the woman he loved, and therefore to be courteously used, and with all chivalry. He never knew how much tenderness crept into his eyes, as sometimes he detected a subtle shade of resemblance between the bright prettiness of his model and the more ideal beauty of the lady of his dreams.

The photograph of the two together, which had attracted his attention the first day he arrived, had been removed at once ; but he persuaded Nancy to bring it back to him under

the pretence that it would be of use to him during her unavoidable absence.

‘It will be the greatest help to me,’ he protested, not altogether mendaciously, his strong nervous fingers closing over it as one clasps tightly a recovered treasure, his eyes passionately intent on the features that had become so unaccountably dear.

‘Do you think we are alike?’ asked the girl after awhile, trembling a little and flushing, because his gaze was not even then withdrawn.

‘There is no one—I mean, you are both very different, I think,’ he stammered, very nearly self-betrayed. ‘Are you and she quite alone in the world? Have you no father, no brother?’ he went on quickly, only to cover his own confusion; not having noticed how the colour was rioting in her cheeks, and that she looked as fresh and sweet as any ‘rose in June.’

She had misunderstood his meaning all through. At first she thought he had checked himself in too open a compliment to herself, and now she fancied he was surprised at their letting lodgings while unprotected by any elder relative — on the propriety of which action they also had debated until their doubts were temporarily lulled to rest by the letter from himself which was addressed to *Mrs.* Bell. Had anything opened his eyes to the truth since then? A question to which his next words constituted a reply.

‘Your sister—is not married?’ Wolffe was asking, determined to know at least this much, though the fear had never very seriously been entertained.

‘No. We have only each other. But we have never felt the need of pity on that account—nor protection,’ proudly.

One thing more he longed to know, but his tongue seemed paralyzed. He felt it impos-

sible to speak of Millicent without showing the strong interest he felt, yet was tortured by the conjecture that the man who was with her that afternoon on the pier was, if no relation, an admirer, perhaps a favoured lover.

He endeavoured to beat back the ever-swell-
ing waves of pain that surged within him,
threatening to overcome his self-possession ;
and his manner towards Nancy became the
more impressive as his knowledge of his own
speech and actions became confused and vague
from emotion. There was some indistinct idea
in his mind—as often an irreverent thought
obtrudes on the most solemn moments, and
one is struck by a humorous perception in
spite of sorrow—that if the sweet face so near
him, so receptive to his influence, were not the
rose, it was at least so close akin to the queen
of flowers as to have caught some of its fra-
grance, and had, independently of that, charms
not to be despised—the conclusion to which

he was insensibly hurried being that if he had never known Millicent he could have loved Nancy.

And Nancy, encased in the vanity natural to her age, credited her own attractions with having already won what she desired, and, mistaking his transitory mood of false sentiment for more earnest feeling, blushed beneath his glances, paling and trembling when, in a sudden fit of energetic working, they were withdrawn.

Time went faster than they knew, and when, after a rather brilliant war of words, which had, indeed, approached perilously near to flirtation, a silence due to reaction ensued, Nancy fell into a waking dream, in which she had lost herself when startled by an unexpected and unwelcome sound.

It was Millicent calling her in clear notes, that presently were echoed faintly from a distance as she passed down the stairs.

Oliver Wendell Holmes speaks of having known two voices that frightened him with their sweetness, making him aware that there might be constituted a creature with such wonderful vocal cords as, penetrating to a man's soul, must cause him to leave all and follow her—though it were to the gates of Erebus.

Such a voice had Millicent Bell. With all its liquid softness and full richness of tone, it still seemed strung in a minor key, and had the clear reverberance of a silver instrument. And as no voice is rightly appreciated when face to face with its possessor, so Wolffe felt now as if he had heard hers for the first time, and hung entranced on the music that pierced his ear, while something close akin to reverence held him mute.

Only in his heart he cried, 'Here, by God's grace, is the one voice for me'—as once before, when face to face with her for the

first time, the feeling had impressed him, 'Here, by God's rood, is the one maid for me.'

His companion declaring in rather nervous accents that she must go, brought him back to the dead level of commonplace. Acquiescing silently in her decision, he laid aside his brushes and waited for her next move, only anxious that she should go and leave him free to lose himself in thought. She came nearer to the easel and surveyed her own presentment thoughtfully.

'It is so beautiful; surely it is nearly finished?' she hazarded timidly.

'I think you need not sit again.'

Her attention arrested by the sharpness of his tone, she glanced into his face and saw that it was also changed in its expression. His lips were firmly brought together with a contraction of the lines about the mouth that spoke of some disturbing force, while his eyes,

which she had once described as 'very blue,' were cold now as imitation sapphires and as lustreless.

Chilled, she knew not why, and overcome by a novel sense of embarrassment that yet kindled no reviving warmth, being utterly unlike the confusion she had experienced before, Nancy murmured something unintelligible and turned hastily away. The next moment she had vanished from the room.

Meeting Jaynes on the stairs, she learnt from him that it was Sir Peter who had been asking where she was, and that this was the third or fourth time within the last hour that he had been despatched in search of her.

'I will come now. Have you any idea of what he wants?'

'Not unless it's to read to him, miss. He used to be content with what I could do.'

'Invalids are fanciful,' said Nancy, wearily climbing the rather steep stairs.

‘Sir Peter’s more than an invalid now. He’s getting weaker every day.’

They had reached the upper landing, and Jaynes stood with his fingers on the handle of the door of Sir Peter’s sitting-room, ready to open it.

His impassive features betokened no sympathy with the fact he had stated, nor with the distressful alarm its announcement had awakened in his hearer ; though that he was aware of its existence was shown by his waiting thus for her to recover.

The bad news was so unexpected, and Nancy was so remorseful, because latterly she had consciously neglected him, that she was glad of a moment to collect herself.

Standing there a little breathless, more with the conflicting thoughts that thronged her brain than from the slight exertion, she looked around her absently, and by chance her gaze wandered into a room opposite. It

was the room in which Jaynes spent all the time not devoted to his duties, and a small round table which stood in the centre of it was strewn with penny weekly papers and gaudily-bound books, which unmistakably betrayed his mental inclination.

It was equally evident that he resented being kept so long from his favourite recreation, for he coughed to remind her he was still waiting her convenience, and thus stimulated into making an effort, Nancy nodded her consent, and when the door was thrown open she passed in.

Though this was not the first time she had seen Sir Peter that day, she had been too self-absorbed to notice any alteration until her attention was directly called to it. Now it struck her very painfully how thin and pinched were his features, how sunken his eyes, and that he seemed to have no energy to more than smile a greeting.

‘I am so very sorry that I did not know you wanted me,’ she ejaculated, springing to his side.

He turned his head impatiently to avoid her gaze, feeling the reluctance natural to an invalid to have the extent of his malady accurately gauged, or to receive pity for what he had endured.

‘I am unreasonable, selfish, Miss Nancy. I shall outwear your patience in time,’ he muttered fretfully.

For answer she took one long-fingered hand and stroked it soothingly with her two warm white ones.

‘It is a pleasure to be with you and to serve you,’ she said presently when he remained silent.

‘A pleasure you have had the strength of mind to deny yourself of late.’

He spoke sarcastically, but a momentary movement of his mouth, and a twitching of

his chin, showed that he was feeling more than anger, and Nancy, who knew that she had neglected him, was remorseful, not offended.

‘Now that I am here, what shall I do for you? Shall I read aloud?’

‘I have had as much literature as I can digest in one day.’

‘Jaynes has been reading to you?’

‘Every police case in the papers. He revels in the description of all crimes, and roots them out of the most unlikely columns as a pig finds truffles.’

‘He would make a first-class criminal himself.’

‘There I disagree with you, Miss Nancy, and so would he. With a face and manner like his a man is compelled to live uprightly. It is the round-faced, comfortable-looking rogue that, winning your confidence straight off, can sin with impunity.’

‘And so poor Jaynes is compelled to be a saint because he has the appearance of a sinner,’ deduced Nancy, laughing.

‘Saintdom is a high altitude to which I don’t think he would aspire. He will always hover on the borderland of vice, regretting that his backslidings into the pleasant country are necessarily circumscribed by adverse circumstances.’

His equanimity restored, Sir Peter conversed in a languid, desultory fashion until dinner-time. Then, as Nancy rose to go, he returned to the charge he had abandoned.

‘Colonel Fayrer, too, was wondering why you did not appear this afternoon. He stayed until five, and I believe only waited on the chance of seeing you,’ he began, glancing into the face which was pretty enough to be excuse for many similar plots and planings.

‘I am very grateful for his condescension,’

with an impertinent curling of her short upper lip.

‘Most young ladies are devoted to guardsmen.’

‘He looks as if he were under that impression.’

‘And you are determined to undeceive him in your own case?’

‘I have determined nothing, so far as he is concerned. He never enters my head.’

‘Then it must be that someone else is in possession,’ shrewdly. ‘What is it, Miss Nancy, has been taking up your time of late?’

His words had brought up a brilliant carmine to her cheeks. She hesitated a moment whether to answer his question or no, a guilty fear that if she kept silence she would be credited with a love-secret causing her to blurt out at last :

‘I have been having my picture painted. Nobody knows except Mrs. Scarrot, and she is

bound not to tell. It is a surprise for Millicent.'

An idea that Millicent's surprise might not be altogether one of pleasure made her stop short and look away nervously, and she did not notice the cloud gathering on Sir Peter's face.

'Who is painting you?' sharply.

'A gentleman living on the ground floor, who is an artist——'

'An artist!—say vagabond, and you would probably hit the mark. They are all the same—these gentlemen who profess to be above honest work, and mask their idleness under art cant, talking as if heaven were not too high for them, yet content to mix with the very outscourings of the earth. Bohemians they call themselves, and do well in that, for they are not fit to dwell in any civilized city. They are the pariah dogs of society—its outcasts; and, like other evils, perhaps they have their use—one mustn't doubt it.'

Breathless from exhaustion, he was forced to end his fierce tirade, while gradually it was borne in upon him that a peroration might possibly be expected.

‘I—I don’t understand your sister allowing such a person beneath her roof. Give her my compliments, and say I recommend her to get rid of the man at the first opportunity, and if one is wanted, to *make* it—give her my compliments and say that. Do you hear, Miss Nancy?’

Nancy was very pale, and her eyes flashed ominously. It was only consideration for the age and helplessness of the speaker that restrained the hot retort that was ready and struggling to come out.

‘I hear plainly, Sir Peter, but I decline to deliver that message. My sister is the best judge of her own affairs; I should not venture to interfere,’ she said quietly, though her tones were tremulous with passion. Then, not

waiting to see the effect of her speech, she withdrew, like a whirlwind that, lacking space to execute its devastating dance, is the more dangerous for its enforced repression.

CHAPTER X.

MILLICENT'S SURPRISE.

OF late Millicent had contracted a habit of slightly frowning when silent and unoccupied, that might have conveyed to anyone interested the fact that she was not quite easy in her mind.

Wonderfully sweet-tempered, with an enviable knack of putting aside any disturbing doubts or gloomy forebodings, the new position of responsibility in which she found herself induced her to look very seriously at every event which otherwise she would have deemed unimportant; while the narrow-mindedness natural to a very young woman led her to

exaggerate what must otherwise have been considered trifles.

Being without brothers or young male cousins, who could have initiated her into some of the lesser vices of their sex, and having lived always with her father, who by chronic ill-health was debarred from the pleasures of wine and tobacco, her rigidity of principle was untempered by experience, so that she was scandalized daily by (what seemed to her) the unhallowed doings of her ground-floor lodger.

As his circle of acquaintances enlarged, he had visitors, whose coming was generally the signal for what Millicent thought was rather uproarious merriment and a cheerful popping of corks; while the empty glasses that were brought down by Mrs. Scarrot at indecently short intervals, and a scent of tobacco that crept into the hall and sometimes penetrated to the basement, was a never-ending annoyance.

It was not that she actually objected to the scent—few women really are averse to the aroma of a good cigar—but she had an idea it was an offence against good taste, and therefore to be resented, the more vehemently that she had no means of redress.

Mrs. Scarrot openly pronounced her opinion that the young man was perfectly well behaved and unobjectionable, *as young men went*. Nancy rather shamefacedly avowed she liked the smell of smoking, and thought the sound of laughter and occasional snatches of song ‘very cheery.’

Notwithstanding this opposition to her views, the feeling grew upon Millicent that she had been over-hasty in coming to a decision, and unwise in prosecuting her plans against Mark Skene’s advice ; he being the only friend she had to turn to in an emergency, and having a knowledge of the world, she now began to realize, was not only an undoubted

advantage, but a necessity. Day by day, as her faith in her own judgment decreased, she relied more and more unquestionably on Skene ; and he, moved by a dread that she might grow independent of his aid, encouraged all her puritanical scruples, using every effort to induce her to try some other method of earning a livelihood.

Her distaste for the existing state of affairs came to a crisis when one morning she met in the hall a girl who swept by her with that assertive self-possession which is a spurious imitation of the ease inseparable from good manners, and rapping sharply at the artist's door, not waiting for the invitation to enter, walked briskly in.

Millicent passed on her way with heightened colour and a throbbing in her throat that nearly choked her. The cheap finery of the garments that had brushed her own, the momentary glimpse she had had of a com-

plexion whose white and red was applied on the arbitrary lines laid down in using paint and powder, the darkened eyes that had darted one bold glance and then were scornfully withdrawn, affected her as painfully as a false note on the piano would distress a fine musician.

That delicate supersensory perception which is possessed by most women told her that she had been in the presence of one with whom, but for this mad scheme which so recklessly she had carried out, she could never have come in contact. Of the darker side of life she knew nothing, yet guessed that artists' models were not invariably of that higher type of womanhood to which she had been accustomed, but oftener those who, in pressing against the sharp points and rough edges of a precarious existence, had parted with the never-to-be-recovered bloom of purity. Sometimes they were women who, in losing hope of a better

life, had become morally dead, impervious to shame—

‘Women, or what had been those gracious things.’

The encounter was a shock to her ; she did not breathe freely until an hour or so later the front door was banged noisily, and she knew the girl was gone. Even then an uncomfortable feeling remained, and she longed to take some decisive action. She had too much spirit to remain willingly quiescent under what she looked upon as an affront, though it might be an unpremeditated one, and one that she had brought on herself by her own folly in allowing under their roof a young man of whom they knew nothing ; they being themselves unprotected by the presence of a parent or any duenna, since Mrs. Scarrot could scarcely come under that denomination.

How to extricate herself from a position

which daily became more difficult to sustain engaged all her thoughts, and once during that afternoon she looked so anxious and distressed that Nancy noticed it and asked if anything were the matter.

Millicent moved her chair round to face her. She had been seated before the writing-table, a blank sheet of paper lying on the blotter and a pen in her fingers, which she twisted idly and in indecision. An idea of writing to Mark Skene had been in her mind; but already she was doubting the expediency of such a move, since a lover is always prone to take the slightest step towards confidence or familiarity as definite encouragement, and she felt that, in spite of all his patience, he was still her lover.

Nancy's downright inquiry compelled an answer before she could make up her mind what it ought to be.

‘It is the old story—the old vexed question

whether I was right or you,' she said meditatively.

'In what? Are you thinking about our lodgers?'

'About *one* of them.'

Nancy drew a deep breath and was silent. Sir Peter could not by any stretch of imagination be considered an undesirable tenant; there could be no doubt who was troubling her sister's mind, causing such a pained, puzzled expression to come over her face.

Going over to her side, Nancy laid her cool fingers upon Millicent's brow and tried to smooth out the wrinkles.

'Don't frown like that; it spoils you altogether. There is nothing to bother about. Why do you think there is?'

'Have you been in Mr. Wolffe's room lately?' was the counter-question that came with unexpected directness.

‘I was there yesterday afternoon,’ Nancy confessed boldly, though that the courage was only surface-deep might have been guessed by Millicent had she looked up ; and the gentle friction of her forehead was discontinued, the trembling hand withdrawn.

‘Has he finished that picture of Hagar ?’

‘It was finished a long time ago ; he is working at another now.’

‘For which he has a model. Nancy, have you seen *that woman* ? He had no right to let her come here ; it—it is an insult.’

All the indignation she had been endeavouring to repress found a vent at last. Millicent’s eyes were flashing, and her white teeth bit fiercely on her underlip, her voice ringing out clear and sweet as ever, yet with an accent of disdainful wrath that must have scathed him against whom it was directed had he chanced to hear. The pen, which once or twice, in absence of mind, she had dipped in the ink,

was thrown down impulsively, as though it were a challenge, splashing the paper and her fingers as it fell.

Nancy tried to pacify her.

‘I don’t suppose there is any harm in her, Millie. All those sort of people paint and powder; and, you see, she is just my height and figure.’

‘*What do you mean?*’

Her anger was driven away by a sentiment more potent still—*fear*, of she knew not what—that paralyzed her nerves and left her helpless and confused, as though suddenly aroused from dreaming. She felt as though she must be walking in her sleep, when, in response to Nancy’s low-toned ‘Come and see,’ she rose and followed her out of the room, up the stairs and to the artist’s door.

There she stopped and laid her hand restrainingly on Nancy’s arm, her eyes asking a question she was too perturbed to utter.

‘It is all right ; it is nothing serious, and he is out,’ said Nancy reassuringly.

Yet she herself felt far less at ease than she strove to appear.

Sir Peter Cairne’s words had stripped away all the plausibility from the false arguments she had urged for her own comfort in self-communings.

She had not dared to give his message to her sister, knowing that his warning would find an echo in her breast, she having always been against Wolffe’s coming, the more so, since resistance creates resistance, that all her efforts to get rid of him had been unavailing. Painfully convinced that Millicent would strongly disapprove what she had done, though she had never been spoken to unkindly by her in all her life, she now was conscious of that uneasy feeling an erring schoolboy is supposed to know in the presence of an unrelenting master. Her heart beating

to suffocation, she pushed open the door and went in.

The artist had told her that he would be out all the afternoon, therefore, without fear of being surprised, she went towards the easel, and lifted the light covering, drawing it quickly to one side in a forlorn hope that the beauty of the picture would disarm Millicent, and lessen her displeasure. And the picture was very beautiful. Even the severe young critic, who stood before it with resolutely compressed lips that would only be parted to condemn, was forced to acknowledge that ; and for some seconds she stood motionless, slim and statuesque in her long black gown, her face as white as her hands, while her eyes never wandered from what they contemplated.

A woman (or an angel), exquisitely shaped, her form scarcely concealed by the diaphanous drapery that floated round her, as though blown back by the wind, which tenderly

revealed the beauty it caressed. Her arched bare feet were delicately poised on a base that might have been of clouds, so soft was it, so faint and undefined. The whole picture was instinct with intense life, and all the poetry of motion was expressed in each line of the figure which seemed flying through the air, and yet conveyed the antagonistic notion that it went reluctantly and with pain—a notion that even a cursory glance at the face must have confirmed. The eyes that looked back were full of pathos, and yet, through a mist that might mean tears, there shone a light that only hope with its divine torch could have illumined—an alluring radiance that seemed to invite pursuit.

The lips, though downward bent in that curve which so eloquently expresses sorrow, seemed only waiting for some signal to widen in a bewildering smile; the upraised arm seemed to beckon, while it waved farewell.

On one corner of the canvas was scrawled

the name on which only the night before Wolffe had hastily decided, and, her eyes grown dim with a violence of emotion, Millicent stooped to read it.

‘A Fair and Flying Fate.’

‘Fate, indeed,’ she soliloquized, as gradually she realized that it was Nancy who was portrayed, and Nancy who had brought this man to their house, who was also the primal cause of her present agony of mind.

The picture grew distorted as she gazed. Art was forgotten, and realism held cruel sway as she imagined to herself the scene that must have suggested the allegory before her.

It was the real Nancy she saw, *her sister Nancy* in disordered every-day dress, who had taken to undignified flight, and whose hair streamed behind her; who, smiling over her shoulder, was tempting somebody to follow. Already the eyes—such sweet eyes, too—were losing the grace of regret, and

seemed to her bold, shameless, like—like eyes she had seen that day.

For therein lay the sharpest sting: the thought that she, who had been intuitively condemned, was so far associated with her sister that it was almost impossible to separate them and declare what had been drawn from which woman in the picture, galled her beyond endurance.

‘How dare he! how dare he!’ she cried, lashing herself into a fury, and would have said far more, but that a glance at Nancy checked for a moment the passionate words upon her lips.

Mutely she was pointing to the door, and, turning involuntarily, Millicent saw that the artist had come in, and was standing rigidly behind her.

‘It is what I might have expected from you!’ she cried, her passion now beyond control. ‘It is like everything else that you

have done, unmanly—ungentlemanly. You followed my sister home as though she were beneath respect. You forced your way into our house, you stayed on when we wished you to go, when we told you to go, when—when—and now you have done this !

She stopped, panting, her fingers tightly clenched and pressed against her bosom.

Her hearers were both silent, Nancy most alarmed at the incoherent, wrathful speech, so unlike the calm hauteur Millicent usually exhibited when offended, and Wolffe also uncertain how to take it.

The justice of part of her accusation he was compelled to admit, but the last sentence puzzled him, and made him pause before replying.

Uneasily he glanced at the picture, which seemed to him devoid of offence, except so far that it had been painted at all; then gradually a feeling grew upon him that all

he had done was not deserving of such unmitigated, such tragic condemnation—that he should be wanting in proper pride were he not to resent it. It struck him, too, with a sense of irritation that she had always treated him with contemptuous disapprobation, even when persuaded into acquiescence with the policy of encroachment he had adopted and acted on all through.

He made a movement to speak, and his words would have been pithy and to the point, showing no mercy where none had been dealt, had not a chivalrous scruple restrained him.

She was a woman. Under no circumstances could he have struck a blow, even in self-defence; and, in spite of the magnificent scorn she had expressed, she looked so helpless—alone, yet with another even weaker depending on herself. Moreover, she was the woman he loved, and, far from wishing to

battle with her, he was fain to kneel down and kiss the hem of her soft robe, beseeching forgiveness, accepting any punishment she imposed. The desire to retaliate had evaporated, and his voice faltered as he said humbly :

‘I am in your hands. I will do whatever you please.’

She looked up in his face, and, startled by something she saw yet did not comprehend, attempted no reply. Holding her head very high, but moving a little uncertainly as she went, she passed from the room ; Nancy following, a living, breathing image of the picture that had caused all this disturbance.

Down in their small sitting-room Millicent walked over to the window and leaned against it in an attitude of utter dejection, laying her face against the cool glass panes to ease its burning, looking yearningly outside, as though longing to shift the heavy burden from her shoulders, and to get into the

open air ; to be free, and yet not ruined by her freedom.

How to earn a livelihood pleasantly is a problem only solved by the very few ; women especially find it hard to struggle with any success against the difficulties that beset them. It seemed madness to abandon what kept them in comparative ease, for any new line of business that might be as disagreeable in other ways, and yet—and yet—— Their present situation was bitterly unpalatable to her taste.

Nancy seated herself on the hearthrug and caught up the cat, glad to work off some of her superabundant nervous energy in playing with and caressing it. As she buried her face in the soft fur, a moisture in her eyes was furtively wiped away, and little by little her composure was restored, her thoughts, always volatile, returning to mundane matters.

Several times she glanced at the clock, and

when the hands pointed to half-past five she asked meekly whether a cup of tea would not do them both good.

‘I could not drink it—*could you ?*’ asked Millicent, tragically reproachful, and her sister was ashamed to confess that a sense of her own misdoings had not robbed her of her appetite for her favourite meal.

With a little air of martyrdom she returned to her former occupation, considering it would be improper to be the first to recover, light the lamps, and settle down to their ordinary routine.

It was a little break in the monotony of the silence they were maintaining when an upstairs bell rang and they heard Mrs. Scarrot’s footsteps ascending the stairs. It was not long before they redescended, and Nancy’s expectation was raised to a high pitch when a knock came to their door, and immediately afterwards a voice asked if ‘Miss Millicent were there.’

The room was quite dark. Dropping the cat, Nancy sprang to her feet and poked up the fire, the bright blaze that leapt up showing that the charwoman held a note, and what looked like a roll of parchment. Millicent came forward to take them, and as she leaned towards the light to decipher what was written the traces of her late emotion were very plainly visible. Her feelings, always very deep, once roused, were not easily calmed.

Mrs. Scarrot had shuffled out, and the two sisters were alone, their cheeks almost touching as together they read Wolfe's letter—the merest line, without signature or address :

‘I hope you will accept the only atonement in my power.’

It was Nancy who, with trembling fingers, untied the accompanying roll ; and she flung herself face downward on the floor, sobbing passionately when she saw what it was, what

it seemed to her now she had known would meet her eyes.

It was the offending picture torn into some six or seven strips ; and Millicent, too, was strangely moved, though she stared down stonily at the fragments that lay at her feet.

It was Nancy's sweet face, with the lovely dawning smile, and Nancy's pretty figure with the fleeting feet—and now Nancy herself was weeping, weeping as if her heart would break ; and it was Millicent's own fault that all her innocent pride and pleasure had been turned to pain.

‘ Why are you crying so ? ’ she asked, almost with an accent of anger, though all the anger she felt now was directed against herself. Then, creeping a little closer, she caught hold of her sister's shoulder and shook it excitedly : ‘ Nancy, Nancy ! why do you care ? Tell me why ? ’ And then : ‘ Oh, Lalage ! I think you care too much,’ she cried, and, throwing her

arms about her, tried to draw her to her breast.

For awhile Nancy resisted perversely ; then, like a tired bird, weary with beating wounded, trailing wings, went fluttering where she had always found repose and comfort, clinging to the stronger nature, and loving all the more fervently because love had, even for the moment, been withheld. But suddenly, afraid that there was something at once protective and sympathetic in Millicent's close embrace, she wrenched herself away, pushing back the rough, bright hair from her forehead and peering suspiciously into her sister's face.

‘ You don't think I am minding on my own account ? ’

‘ Tell me what is vexing you, ’ said Millicent, gently persuasive, disarming Nancy's resentment, and causing her to answer more quietly, though with some pride :

‘ I am sorry for his sake. He said it was

the only picture with which he had ever been in the least degree satisfied—the first with any life in it, any *soul*—and he thanked me,’ her lips trembling, ‘for helping him to success.’

‘And you are unhappy that this chance is denied him?’

Nancy moved uneasily and twisted her fingers in the hairs of the hearthrug, pulling out a few of them before she replied :

‘I wanted to help him. I would have done anything to help him,’ she said.

Millicent sighed and rose from her cramped position on the floor, walking to and fro in the semi-darkness, wondering what she ought to do, and whether advice was any good, ever any good.

To warn the child against giving her heart unasked would be only precipitating a possible calamity ; to allow matters to continue as they were until they reached a crisis might be equally unwise. To send the man away now

might be to spoil a fair chance of happiness for them both, yet if he remained it might end in a broken heart for Nancy. There was no doubt that she cared now, but what of him?

Half closing her eyes, she tried to conjure up a vision of these two as lovers, but the figures refused to range themselves in approved fashion. Always she saw Nancy wistful and entreating, all her pretty smiles drowned in a new familiarity with tears, while the artist stood aloof, indifferent, as it appeared. The look she had seen for a moment in his eyes as she left the room was evanescent, and would not be reproduced to please her fancy. Yet she remembered that it was not—no, certainly not *indifferent*. She went back to the fire and seated herself in front of it.

‘You must remember,’ she began judicially, ‘that we are in a false position. Two girls living alone, as we do, cannot be too careful.

If I spoke more bluntly than I ought to have done to Mr. Wolffe it was for this reason.'

'He at least was not to blame because we were foolish in the first instance.'

'And,' went on Millicent, unheeding the interruption, 'men are not always chivalrous where women are concerned. They take advantage of our mistakes sometimes and do not deny themselves a pleasure, even when it is at the expense of someone else's pain. They amuse themselves, as the phrase goes, and if anyone pays for that amusement it is not they.'

Without being aware of it, she was repeating what she had once heard from her father when he had returned indignant and distressed from the bedside of a dying girl—dying because she was ruined and deserted; and the words took so far the attributes of a quotation that they were spoken with no warm sense of their truth, but dispassionately and in even tones.

‘I know nothing against Mr. Wolffe except what we both know, but I can imagine that an artist or a poet would be more fickle and unreliable than the rest. You can understand that it would be so, can’t you, Lalage? A pretty face sometimes charms his fancy without touching his heart. He is always off at a tangent, pursuing an ideal, and when he has overtaken what he has pursued he finds it disappointing on a nearer view. It is not what he thought, and he coolly puts it on one side with all his spoilt canvas and waste paper—another failure.’

‘And why am *I* treated to this edifying lecture on men and morals?’ with base ingratitude; not venturing, however, to meet her sister’s eyes.

‘Because I felt I must warn you, even if you are angry with me, dear. You are all I have in the world. Lalage! if you give up

laughing and take to tears I don't know what I shall do !

She was trying to speak lightly, but her voice shook and her head was purposely turned away, so as not to see the effect of what she had said. She thought Nancy would be overwhelmed with shame or confusion, yet it was scarcely a relief when the answer came clear and crisp with scorn :

‘ You think I am a child still, Millie, but I am *not*. I am only three years younger than you, and old enough to judge for myself. You must not thwart me—you can help me if you will.’

‘ I will do anything to help you.’

‘ Then make it up with him somehow. Let him paint me again if he chooses. Don't let him think it is *my sister* has spoilt his first chance of success.’

‘ You—wish—him to stay on here—after—what has happened ?’

‘I could not bear him to go.’

Their voices had been sinking lower and lower ; Nancy’s last words were in a whisper, but their sense had penetrated to Millicent’s heart and pierced it like a sharp knife.

Her little sister was lost to her ; another had stepped in between them, and nothing would ever be the same again. Even if this were only a fancy that of itself would die a natural death, yet the fact that it had ever been was pregnant with meaning.

Lalage, lighthearted, laughing Lalage, had put away childish things for ever, and entered into her woman’s heritage of love and pain.

CHAPTER XI.

A TRUCE.

NANCY was no love-lorn maiden.

Having persuaded her sister not to act against her, it did not enter her head that there could be any further cause for fear. To know that she had left her childhood behind filled her with a pleasant sense of importance, as the donning of her first long gown and the turning up of her hair had done a year or two ago ; and when her first startled surprise at the novelty of the position in which she found herself was over, she was conscious of secret thrills of delight, delicious hopes and dreamy fancies, that, not banishing either laughter or

song from her lips, yet lent a new softness to the one, a new significance to the other.

At that age vanity is so natural and so pretty. It is like the artless confidence of a child that leads it straight to a stranger's side, never doubting its welcome nor apprehensive of unkindness. That Leslie Wolffe had followed her to her home that day, and then and there taken up his residence under their roof, subsequently painting her picture, seemed sufficient proof that he was deeply interested in her, and, notwithstanding his ordinarily indifferent demeanour, there had once or twice been an expression in his eyes, a meaning in his tones, that she had interpreted according to her own desires.

Quite aware of her good looks—as, indeed, what woman is not?—she had too little knowledge of life and its contradictory phases to wonder whether they were the sort to please his fancy, whether, indeed, he were fancy free,

and so open to an impression ; nor could she have credited that a man with his whole heart given to another could yet be so far disloyal to its truest instincts as to allow himself to admire any other in the world, and even unwittingly betray that it was so. The intolerance of youth and its faith are too strong lights to throw upon a man's actions ; there are few who would not step aside to avoid the trying glare. Once or twice Wolffe, led away, perhaps, by the likeness between the sisters, or heartsore because his passion seemed so hopeless, and in desperation trying to force it from his memory by the introduction of other thought, had suffered a superficial change to come over his manner which many a girl would have taken for what it was worth, repaying him in his own spurious coin, but which Nancy, in her innocence, accepted as purest gold.

To do the artist justice, it was almost un-

consciously he had lapsed from the path which so few can walk without divergence, and even had he considered the matter, he might have deemed it a harmless amusement, since Nancy seemed to have many weapons to her hand; certainly her behaviour at their first meeting was open to misconstruction. The slight attraction he had felt then had been so suddenly superseded by a far more enduring one that he had never troubled to ask himself if her conduct then was due to levity or childish thoughtlessness; and that she was seriously in love with him he never dreamed. In the meantime, Nancy, with a hundred little airs and graces engendered by her new growth into womanhood, seemed translated into a world of mysterious beauty, and surveyed the usual routine of household duties as though from behind a veil. In rapt unconsciousness of her own doings, she ate her food and remarked on passing events;

but her eyes were with her heart, and they shone so radiantly as she gazed beyond her into space, while so exquisite a flush alternately deepened and faded in her face, that, at the breakfast-table the morning after their explanation, Millicent was carried away by an enthusiasm, and leaning forward gave her an impulsive kiss—a seal on her agreement to help. Mark Skene had just sent them a large basket of flowers that had come from the hot-houses at his country home ; and, determined to do what she had undertaken to do well, Millicent selected some of the sweetest as a peace offering, and went upstairs with them to the artist's room.

It was more than a surprise to him when she appeared, a smile upon her face and the flowers in her hand. He had never seen her thus, careless and light-hearted as other women were, her sense of responsibility cast from her as a cloak that is too heavy in warm

weather, and with a perceptible anxiety to please.

‘I brought you a few flowers to brighten your room,’ she said sweetly, while he remained silent and literally a little open-mouthed. ‘I came,’ she explained, ‘because I want to apologize for what I said yesterday, and to tell you how sorry I am your beautiful picture is spoilt—by my fault.’

‘If anyone is to blame it must be me.’

‘No, no ; I won’t admit that. My sister had consented, and she is old enough now to judge for herself. I was wrong to interfere ; but it seems only the other day she was a child, and I forgot that in point of years there is very little difference between us.’

Under the lightness of her tone he thought he detected a wistfulness—a regret—and his heart grew very pitiful. This Millicent was so unlike the Millicent he had encountered before, generally in war ; though even when

most self-reliant there had always been beneath her girlish dignity an underlying sadness appealing irresistibly to his sympathy.

‘There was something in the picture offended your taste. It did not please you.’

‘Not quite,’ she confessed, with a slight blush.

‘You see,’ twirling his moustache rather awkwardly, ‘it was allegorical, and my subject took hold of me so that I forgot that, as it was a portrait too, I must not treat it quite as a fancy picture. But I would like you to believe I never meant to offend.’

‘I am sure you did not. I know so little about painting’—the blush still upon her cheek, but her eyes upraised in prettiest apology she did not know how to frame in words.

He did not answer for a moment. It might have been he was a little disappointed at a certain conventionality of manner and

opinions; a fault from which Nancy, with all her defects of character, was free—too free, perhaps, for this over-civilized century. If any such thought was in his mind, it was very transitory, and the next moment he had returned to his original idea of her perfection.

Just then she looked too charming to criticise, excitement having given warmth and colour to her beauty, and the slight uncertainty and tremulousness of her speech enhancing its effect. Her hair, though naturally wavy, was not usually allowed to fall upon her low white brow; but now one curl had rebelliously asserted its right to wander whither led by its sweet will, and lay there soft and bright.

The artist guessed (and was right in his conjecture) that as she came she had buried her face among the flowers, and that this disarrangement was the result. She had

given the flowers into his hand when she first came in, and now his fingers tightened convulsively round the stalks. Did they not come from her? Were they not impregnated by her sweetness—breathing of her presence?

‘And I am to go unpunished?’

‘It is not a question of *your* punishment. It is *I* who will do penance. I want you to paint Nancy again—that is, of course, if you care to do so.’

‘Scarcely anything would give me more real pleasure.’

To ask her to sit for him herself seemed such wild presumption that he did not dare give it a second thought, though the reservation he had expressed might have betrayed that the idea had entered his mind only to be immediately dismissed.

‘You would rather I chose another subject than the last. Is it not so?’

‘I would rather it was not a fancy picture

and not allegorical' —the slightest stress upon the word, and with just the slightest smile.

It emboldened him to beg that, to make sure the picture was exactly what she approved, she would accompany her sister sometimes and watch its progress.

To which she graciously agreed.

'My room will be all the sweeter for your flowers,' he said earnestly as she left; and believing that it was for Nancy's sake, because they had been brought as an olive-branch, Millicent showed no displeasure at his impressiveness.

The interview passed from her memory at once, but the circumstances that had given rise to it were not so easily set on one side.

No argument could have persuaded her of the propriety of their present position, more especially since the case was complicated by this incipient love-affair; and though she had promised to take no decisive step at present,

she did not feel bound by the promise altogether, and intended to take resolute measures to put an end to it the first opportunity that offered. For Nancy's sake she had made friends with the man who had been the cause of all this trouble, and in spite of herself, as she grew to know him better, her prejudice against him was insensibly softened. He could talk well, and sometimes when she dropped in for form's sake during a sitting she was induced to stay longer than she intended, becoming interested in a discussion, pleased, too, with the growth of Nancy's portrait beneath her eyes.

In this fresh effort everything that had offended before was carefully avoided, and bounded on every side by his promise, Wolffe found a difficulty in lifting it above the commonplace. Within the narrow limits assigned to him it was impossible to move freely ; but there was too much poetry in his nature for

some of it not to escape through his brush, and, like ichor, spread through the picture, endowing it with ideality of beauty.

The subject in itself was simple and entirely conventional, but in its treatment it had gradually become something more.

Nancy, with her head slightly on one side, in a bird-like attitude of attention, which was very characteristic—a canary perched upon her finger, with open beak and ruffled wings outstretched—was all would have appeared at the cursory first glance : but as one gazed one felt curious to know what it was the bird was singing—whether it could be the ordinary light shakes and trills and swelling notes that brought the yearning look into the girl's sweet eyes, the shadowy smile on to her lips.

Was it the 'maddening music of other days' that so stirred her soul, or something unknown yet and feared, while it was desired ?

There was a suggestiveness in the picture

that was infinitely taking. It might have been called 'Mystery,' instead of merely 'Birdie,' and subsequently Wolffe wrote these verses underneath :

' Birds' love and birds' song
Flying here and there ;
Birds' song and birds' love,
And you with gold for hair.

' Birds' song and birds' love,
Passing with the weather ;
Men's song and men's love,
To love once and for ever.'

Quite unconsciously, Nancy had aided this success, and the story written in her eyes Wolffe would never have portrayed had he guessed that the key to it lay in her love for himself. His admiration of her was so purely artistic that he spoke of it quite frankly to Millicent one afternoon, as they stood alone for a few moments before his easel.

' I think she is the loveliest child I ever saw,' he said with enthusiasm.

‘She is not a child—you must not think of her as one,’ said Millicent quickly, startled out of her self-possession, and forgetting what meaning her words might bear.

But he had not understood. In her presence he never seemed to realize anything that was not connected with herself, and his only fear now was that he had offended by too bald a compliment. He hastened to apologize, and somehow his apology strengthened Millicent in the doubt she scarcely dared to harbour. On Nancy she bestowed redoubled affection, surrounding her with instances of her love as we lavish benefits with prodigal open hands on those predestined by unalterable fate to death or worse affliction. And in spite of the girl’s almost invariable brightness there was at times a sorrowful cadence in her voice that filled her sister with apprehension, while once, when she had met her coming out of Wolffe’s

room, she had seen tears shining in her eyes.

This precipitated an action she had contemplated for some time.

Mark Skene, with a jealousy that must have been intuitive, could not rest under the knowledge that the artist still lived in the little house in Marine Square, and so far as he could determine was likely to remain there. When he found that for some unexplained reason Millicent would not consent to his dismissal, he took a different course, and tried to induce her to leave her lodgers in possession, *i.e.*, to sell the lease of the house as it stood, and let the new owners take their chance of not losing them.

He had so far interested himself that he had instructed his lawyer to look out for anyone wishing to start such a speculation, and a few days ago had brought a letter to Millicent from a widow who had had a

small school at Putney, and finding the work too hard for her, was anxious to try a less onerous way of earning a livelihood.

Her health having failed, she had been advised to go to the seaside, and the house being at that time full, proving the situation a desirable one, she was willing to exchange on even terms with its present occupants, or pay a sum down for it when she disposed of her own property.

This letter had remained unanswered ; but now Millicent, consulting Skene, and confirmed in her resolution by his evident approbation of her scheme, wrote and announced that she would go up to town for a day or two, and see whether the house would suit them if they decided on altering their plans.

To this Nancy made no demur. She had always wished to live in London, and did not believe that Wolffe would remain with them always here, however strong the inducement.

There may have been, too, an undefined thought—since thought travels fast, and is not fettered by any ordinary rules or scruples—that if they were to be separated, and Millicent must live her life alone, it was only just she should choose on what lines she would work.

Besides which, she knew, without Millicent's tender assurance to that effect, that if Wolffe loved her he would follow wherever she might go, now that this open friendliness was established; while if he did not love her—why, then nothing mattered. She might as well die a schoolmistress as in any other business or profession.

So no obstacles were laid in Millicent's way, and a day or two later she went to London by a mid-day train, a little excited at the prospect of a possible change, but with no prescience of the strange events which were to transpire before her return.

CHAPTER XII.

FACE TO FACE.

MRS. SCARROT always declared that the door had not closed upon her young mistress before things began to go wrong ; in which statement she was literally correct.

Though Millicent and Nancy were in the cab, something was missing at the last moment, and Mark Skene, who had come to superintend the departure, was despatched in search of it, so that the door was actually not shut, but held close by the charwoman to keep out the cold wind—a disappointment to Leslie Wolffe, who had heard from Nancy of her sister's intention, though not of its ulterior motive, and had come out of his room in the

wild hope of catching a last glimpse of Millicent before she went.

While he hesitated as to how best he could carry out his plans, Sir Peter Cairne's valet came downstairs with so noiseless a tread that his propinquity was unsuspected until actual friction of his shoulder caused the artist to turn, as with sinuous dexterity Jaynes managed to pass between him and the spiral end of the balustrade.

The recognition was mutual, and evidently as unexpected by both as by one it was undesired. Mrs. Scarrot could see as much from where she stood, and Mark Skene, returning from his errand, had also a full view of them, and knew that, unlikely as it might seem, they were face to face for the first time, when he heard the few sentences that were uttered :

‘Jaynes here? with whom?’ burst from Wolfe’s lips first.

‘I have not lost my old place, sir.’

‘And Sir Peter?’

The valet ignored the query conveyed in the exclamation. The sardonic smile on his thin lips was more marked than ever, and his silence alone was irritating, perhaps not without design.

‘Did you hear me speak? I asked where Sir Peter was. Answer!’ cried Wolffe violently.

‘I presumed you knew he was here, sir, or——’

Again he stopped short, warned that he must not finish what he had meant to say by the angry light in the listener’s eyes. Once before he had disregarded a similar warning, and paid for his temerity.

‘Confound you for an infernal liar!’ flashed out the artist, and went back into his room, white and shaken with wrath.

The collision had lasted a few seconds only,

and was concluded before Skene reached the hall-door.

Without comment he got into the cab, and told the man to drive to the station. It was with no definite reason he kept silence, but from habitual caution, experience having proved to him that words once spoken no power on earth can recall, while reticence, if an error, can often at leisure be repaired.

Mrs. Scarrot, closing the door sharply, flounced down to the kitchen, darting a scornful glance at the object of her inveterate hatred as she passed.

Jaynes was left alone in the hall, and stood for some moments in deep thought, during which time the smile on his face flickered and changed before reverting to its original fixed expression of unpleasant mirth. Then, with the air of one who, having laid a train of gunpowder, is conscious of his ability to fire it

with effect at the right time, he slowly went upstairs.

He was greeted by his master with an angry question as to why he had been so long, and where the newspaper was.

‘The paper has not come yet, sir, but I have some news,’ was answered quietly.

‘Then give it, man. I suppose it won’t increase in value by keeping.’

‘It’s Mr. Wolffe. He’s in this house—has been here some time, sir.’

‘What ! what ! what !’

Sir Peter fell back in his chair, staring and stammering.

For an instant the valet thought he was going to have a fit, and blamed himself for not having made his communication more carefully ; but gradually the livid whiteness which had spread over the old man’s face was succeeded by a more healthy hue, as, power of speech restored, he burst out into a storm

of invectives. ‘Had the scoundrel come to look after his own interests?’ ‘Did he think that, if not actually on the spot to step into a dead man’s shoes, they would be spirited away?’ were among the more intelligible of his inquiries; and, purple now with rage, he finished with cutting bitterness:

‘At least, he was determined to get early notice of my death!’

For years Jaynes had borne a grudge against Wolffe he had determined to repay, and now that the opportunity had come he did not withhold his hand. Leaning forward and speaking slowly, that the poisoned drop he meant to instil might not miscarry, but its deadly meaning be infused through the receiver’s whole system, he suggested, with an admirable assumption of reluctance to vilify the absent, commingled with a desire to do his duty by his master:

‘I only hope, sir, he did not mean to *hasten* it.’

‘Good God!’ whispered Sir Peter, paralyzed by this new abominable fear.

It was necessary to administer a stimulant before he could recover, and even then he seemed to have lost all his self-confidence; and though he affected then to laugh at Jaynes’ suggestion, disdainfully ascribing it to the yellow-backed novels which were devoured daily with such avidity, he could not banish the thought from his mind, and at last, in desperation, sent a note to Colonel Fayrer, to beg his immediate presence.

By the time he arrived, in answer to the summons, Sir Peter was less overcome, and could talk the matter over with tolerable calmness. It was necessary to have the facts of the case clear, and to do this he had to tell the story from the beginning.

It was nearly twelve years ago that, during

a year's furlough from India, he had encountered a rich and very handsome widow, with one son—a young man of about eighteen years of age, then at college.

Sir Peter was still a personable, distinguished-looking man, and no one imagined but that the widow liked him for himself—a belief he shared at the time of his marriage, but which subsequently he set aside as a delusion, being one of those men who are depressingly modest and correspondingly suspicious.

The honeymoon was scarcely over before he began to remember that Mrs. Wolffe in marrying him had gained a better position, and that, being well connected and with interest at headquarters, she might have calculated on his help in starting her son in his own profession. That she was rich enough to have purchased a younger, and in other respects a more desirable, husband, had she

held those views, weighed for nothing against this jaundiced impression; and the fact that her son had no taste for the army he regarded as a perversity she had not taken into account as possible.

He was furiously jealous of his stepson, and full of contempt when he elected to stay at home and take up painting as an amusement, and perhaps more seriously later if likely to succeed; for he held the old-fashioned ideas that every man should belong to some trade or profession. Sir Peter had never dignified art with the name of either, and believed those who adopted such erratic courses were beyond the pale; while the Bohemianism of which Leslie, with youthful enthusiasm, talked glibly was merely a euphemism for 'going to the devil.' Never having been thrown with young men, he had no sympathy with them; and it was not to be surprised that his dislike, once understood, was returned with interest.

His wife steered her very difficult course with tact and patience. No longer very young, she understood that perfect happiness was not compatible with the conditions of our poor humanity, and having in her first marriage met with unlimited devotion and a characterless amiability that had finally palled, she was almost relieved to find that her second husband was not likely to err in the same direction. Womanlike, she loved him better that he was not completely within her thrall, and the jealousy and doubt which would have tormented some to desperation were almost welcomed by her as signs of his affection. Still beautiful, she courted no admiration except his ; and even her son had reason sometimes to feel himself neglected, and ultimately withdrew from her house and settled himself in rooms of his own, where the preference she showed would not always be before his eyes to distress him.

The idea that he was unloved being once firmly established in Sir Peter's mind, it proved impossible to eradicate it. Five years of unvarying and most angelic patience had not persuaded him to the contrary; and when at the end of that period she died, leaving him her whole fortune and her son dependent on his generosity, it altogether failed to convince him of her love and perfect trust. Indeed, by some strange mental twist, it rendered him more gloomily determined that she had not been true, and that only as an atonement for a wrong in thought, if not in deed, would she have perpetrated what even he felt to be an injustice.

According to his lights, he had acted fairly by her son. He had made him an allowance of eight hundred a year, and, there being no others with better claims, in his will had left him his own private fortune as well as his mother's; but he had never kept up any

friendly relation with him, and of late years ill-health not having improved his always irritable temper, his dislike to him had become a mania.

Once the young artist, to show he felt no resentment at being kept out of the fortune he naturally believed would come to him direct, had called upon him when he heard he was in town; but the visit had been misconstrued. Sir Peter, in a paroxysm of rage, had accused him of coming to see when he was going to die, and driven to frenzy by the young man's cool contempt, had threatened that if ever he came to his house again, or anywhere they might be likely to meet, he would cut him off with a shilling.

‘And now he is here—has been here in the same house with me for weeks, without my knowledge,’ he finished, the first vehemence of his wrath having subsided into a no less ominous calm.

‘How is it you never knew?’ asked Colonel Fayrer.

‘A chapter of accidents. I never leave my room, and Jaynes has managed to quarrel with the servant, and is afraid to show his nose in the kitchen, so he never met him until to-day.’

‘Then is it not quite possible that your stepson was also ignorant?’

Sir Peter glanced sideways at Jaynes to see if any credence could be given to the presumption, but met with no encouragement from those thin, pursed lips and mocking eyes.

Like all invalids, he depended a great deal on the one who was always near him for moral support, and he felt unwilling to go against him now.

‘Not at all likely,’ he said, the more sharply that he might seem to have hesitated. ‘There’s a letter from him there in which he

probably says as much, but the facts are against any such professions.'

He flicked it across the table impatiently, and Colonel Fayrer, taking the action to mean a request to open it, broke the envelope, first skimming its contents, then reading it a second time aloud :

'DEAR SIR,

'I would like you to believe that when I took up my abode here I had not the faintest idea you were also a resident ; I was even unaware you were in Brighton. So soon as Miss Bell returns I will make immediate arrangements to leave.

'Yours truly,

'L. WOLFFE.'

'It seems a manly, straightforward sort of a letter ; and, you see, he promises to go.'

‘ At some vague future date. Why did he not go at once, if it were a chance encounter ?’

To which Colonel Fayrer, knowing nothing of the feeling which had prompted Wolffe’s remaining—a feeling stronger even than self-interest, which is usually the guiding impulse of a man’s mind—had no reply ready.

‘ It does not matter in the least ; he is at liberty to suit his own convenience now,’ went on Sir Peter, with a deadly quietude of manner that, in a man of his disposition, signalled ‘ danger ’ more certainly than any crimson flag.

‘ You mean——’

‘ I mean that his presence is no longer antagonistic to my peace of mind. It is the presence of my *heir* I objected to, and he is that no longer.’

‘ Good heavens, sir ! do you mean that because of this—an accident, perhaps, and in

any case no grave offence—you will disinherit your wife's son, your own nearest connection, if I understand you right ?'

' That is my intention.'

The guardsman, never very fluent of speech, was utterly dumfounded. His eyeglass quivered and fell from his eye, and he tugged at his moustaches as though trying to pump up words. It was owing to the very strength of his ideas that the words which suggested themselves were disconnected, meaningless, and quite useless for expressing any purpose.

His life, if an eventful one, had been exceptionally blameless, and he could at any time have presented a fair sheet for inspection, unblotted, and with only a short register of faults, common enough and with no foundation in evil ground. Like the woman in a dimly-remembered story, who, given three wishes, chose first to possess *tact*, secondly desired *tact*, and thirdly begged for *tact*, so

his primary consideration was *honour*, and all subsequent thoughts pointed in the same direction.

Slow in coming to a conclusion, when once he arrived there he very seldom wavered, and as he debated on the subject it became very clear that this money did not belong to Sir Peter at all, and he had no right to divert it from the course in which it was originally intended to flow.

When, annoyed by his silence, the old man asked him querulously what his opinion was on the case, he did not hesitate to answer, and his thoughts being lucid now, words were no longer wanting in which to clothe them.

He spoke very coldly and decisively :

‘ As you have called me into consultation, I will tell you candidly that I think this money was left you *in trust* ; you have no right to dispose of it as you please ; if

you did as you threatened, it would be iniquitous.'

'It is no threat. You may regard it as an established fact. I have telegraphed for my lawyer, and he will arrive to-night or early to-morrow morning. Moreover, I have already decided whose name is to be substituted for Leslie Wolffe's in my will.'

'Then remonstrances are useless?'

'Quite so. Have you no curiosity to learn who is to inherit?'

'Not the slightest,' said the Colonel, looking about for his hat and stick, intending to depart.

Jaynes, who had remained in the room under the pretence of arranging the writing-table and replenishing the inkstand, was deeply interested and glued to the spot. It was characteristic of the man that his work had been done so noiselessly that Sir Peter, who hated any sound or movement while he was

talking, had been oblivious of his presence, and that now, intense as was his excitement, he did not suffer one drop of ink to fall from the bottle he was holding.

‘And yet,’ went on Sir Peter with a flickering smile, ‘it may concern you very nearly.’

A suspicion that flashed across Colonel Fayrer’s mind made him draw up his slight figure into more than military rigidity, and a disagreeable expression of hauteur came into his face.

Everything connected with one’sself is viewed through microscopic or telescopic glasses, so that naturally the importance of the merest trifle is exaggerated, while far-away possibilities are sometimes brought by the same agency alarmingly near. The least imaginative man, and the least impulsive, Colonel Fayrer was momentarily convinced that his eccentric companion contem-

plated leaving to him the property in question, and felt sorely tempted to renounce it indignantly before actually offered.

Jaynes himself, though he had acted from revengeful motives, was fully alive to the chance that he might reap even more than he had sown; that, the rightful heir displaced, Sir Peter might elect to reward the man who had unmasked him, who had also been his faithful servitor so many years.

He was breathless with suspense, and, indeed, to both the men the pause seemed interminably long before Sir Peter, who had probably guessed something of their thoughts and been amusing himself at their expense, said with deliberate emphasis :

‘ I mean to leave everything to Miss Nancy Bell.’

‘ She would not take it,’ said the guardsman quickly.

‘ Not ? We will see. Jaynes, go down-

stairs and request Miss Nancy to come to me for a moment, if not engaged.'

Without a word the valet left the room, his thoughts scattered by the unexpectedness of the *dénouement*, but with a shrewd idea that it would be well to pay court to the coming queen.

His manner towards her was so obsequious, so servile in its suppleness, that Mrs. Scarrot, who was with Nancy when the message was delivered, could not restrain her disgust until he was out of hearing.

'He's up to no good, you may be bound, miss, or he'd not be so palavering. I doubt he's in trouble with his master, and wants you to say a word for him. If you'll take my advice, Miss Nancy, you'll do nothing of the sort. Let him go. A horrid creepy-crawly sort of creature; it makes one's blood curdle to see him!'

'You are too hard on poor Jaynes. He

can't help looking like a villain, and I don't suppose he *is* one,' said Nancy.

Putting down her book, she rose and went upstairs, not dreaming that there was more in the summons than the usual request for music or some reading. She frowned a little when she saw Colonel Fayrer, giving him rather a curt little nod before she addressed Sir Peter.

'Jaynes said you wanted me.'

'So I do, Miss Nancy. I want to do something for you. Have you any objection to my acting fairy godmother to your Cinderella.'

'That depends,' nonchalantly. 'I have no particular fancy for glass slippers. I always thought they must have been very uncomfortable wearing.'

'Do you think dead men's shoes would be any better?' with a cynical smile.

'I cannot say, never having worn them. Did you call me to ask conundrums, Sir

Peter, and is my head to be cut off if I fail to answer them, like the hero of a fairy tale ?'

She spoke lightly, yet looked inquiringly from one to the other, seeing that something serious was at the bottom of this burlesque. Colonel Fayrer, meeting her glance, felt a curious impulse to go over to her side, as if someone standing near might strengthen her to a right decision. She looked such a little child, such a tender, fragile child, and it was a temptation that might overcome a Hercules. That he himself had not been moved when he thought himself likely to be assailed thereby never struck him ; and if it had, he would have explained the mystery away with a careless remark that he had always had leanings towards eccentricity, and never sufficiently appreciated the goods the gods had already given him to desire further favours.

'Sit down, child ; it's a long story, and—it

may surprise you. Do you remember when I came here first I warned you I might never leave the house alive ?'

Nancy nodded gravely.

'And you will understand that, even judging by the natural order of events, I must be a little nearer dying than I was then, and that therefore——'

'I hoped you were better,' she murmured, a film across her eyes dimming her vision, or she might have seen that he was looking wretchedly ill and shaken. It was indeed only by an effort he went on with what he had to say.

'I don't think I am actually any worse, but my health has no immediate bearing on the point at issue. I am a very rich man, Nancy, and the question has arisen to whom my money should go at my death.'

He spoke so solemnly that the words which rose naturally to Nancy's thoughtless

lips, 'What has that to do with me?' seemed unsympathetic, almost irreverent, and were not uttered.

'Now, Nancy, it is very charming to be rich. However pretty a woman may be, she is all the prettier for a golden setting. She has more friends than ever her sweet looks would win her, and there are always plenty of people ready to make the rough places smooth for her and easy.'

'Ye—es. I have never doubted it would be very nice, but why—why say all this—to me—now?'

Listening a little breathlessly and in wonderment, her brow puckered over her widely-opened eyes, Colonel Fayrer was reminded irresistibly of the wooing of Danæe in a shower of gold, and wondered whether she, too, could be tempted to succumb, as have been so many of her sex since those mythological days. Oddly enough, almost simultaneously his

thoughts flew back to the moment when he had seen her first, bathed in the glory of a setting sun, its gold upon her hair and eyes and woollen gown. To which would she incline? Would she stretch eagerly after the metallic brightness that is so seldom without marks and stains, gathered in passing through hands soiled by guilt, of which too often it was the primal cause, or be content with the brightness which is shed lavishly on land and sea—God's wealth of brightness, which is free to rich and poor alike, and only shines to bless?

'Because I want to leave everything to you,' said Sir Peter, speaking with the weight and impressiveness of one who knows it is something marvellous he has to tell. Nor was he disappointed of the effect of his announcement.

Nancy had not availed herself of his invitation to sit down when she first entered; she

was still standing; and as she understood what it was he was saying, what it might mean to her, she swayed uncertainly, like a leaf shaken by a sudden gust of wind—like a leaf fluttered down softly on to a low ottoman that was beside her.

Colonel Fayrer's heart sank as he watched her. She was such a little child—'such a little child,' he repeated again and again to himself, in tender excuse for an error not yet committed. Sir Peter also felt triumphant, in advance assured of her actual consent.

'It is all so strange and so—so sudden! I can say nothing, not even 'thank you,' until I know more about it. Why are you only now deciding what to do with your money? Surely there is someone belonging to you, someone with a claim—not a mere stranger, as I am,' she murmured presently, pushing back the hair from her forehead, as

though the soft silken fluff weighed heavily and impeded her power of thought.

Colonel Fayrer breathed a sharp sigh of relief, believing he saw a distant light through darkness. Sir Peter did not attempt to shirk the question.

‘There was someone, but he has forfeited his claim,’ he said sternly.

‘And where is he? who is he?’ she asked faintly.

‘He is in this house. The rascally painter I warned you against is my stepson, who came here secretly to watch and wait for my death—a human vulture—a jackal—longing for the breath to be out of my body! But I will cheat him yet. He shall never have what he expects—never, never!’

Sir Peter was white from emotion, and trembling in his chair, though, conscious of his weakness, he grasped both arms of it to keep himself steady and outwardly composed.

Nancy, on the contrary, had recovered, and was bright and alert as ever.

‘ You wish to enrich me at his expense ?’

‘ The money will never go to him now, whatever happens. I should like you to have it rather than any other.’

‘ You are very good, Sir Peter, and I am sorry to disappoint you, but I could not accept a fortune so. I should expect the money to burn my fingers ; it would weigh me down and smother me. I could not *live* under such a burden !’ she returned.

She had tried to speak calmly, feeling that her decision would seem the more unalterable if calmly uttered ; but her passionate feeling on the subject betrayed itself in her last words, and she threw out her little hands as she rose from her seat with a gesture of infinite scorn and indignation.

‘ Tut, tut, child ! you are too quixotic. I am the best judge of my own action ; I may

surely choose what to do with my own. You don't know what you are refusing, what it means ; you don't realize the benefit it would be, not only to yourself, but to your sister.'

'I should like to help her, of course ; but she would be the last to wish to be helped so. You are angry now, Sir Peter. When you have had time to reflect, you will see that I am right. I could not take your money ; but I thank you all the same for wishing me to have it.'

Nodding to Colonel Fayrer, who was looking at her with adoration in his eyes, and smiling at Sir Peter, she went out, meeting Jaynes outside, and passing him with some surprise that he should be so near the door with no ostensible reason for his vicinity.

'A woman's "no," that precedes a "yes,"' said Sir Peter, glancing uneasily at the Colonel, who, however, shook his head. 'Women

often have these high heroics, but they come out of them. It is their nature to like pleasant things—luxuries and amusements that only gold can buy. For all their hypocritical ways, their mock airs of independence, their coquetry with serious matters, and their angelic faces, they have generally a keen eye to the main chance.’

‘Not she ; she will never take your money,’ dissented Colonel Fayrer.

‘You say so because you are half in love with her, if not wholly—I have seen it from the first—and most men, without any very logical reason, believe one woman better than the rest.’

Colonel Fayrer for a second time took up his hat to go.

The question being decided, it was no good discussing it any more, and he wanted to be alone to think over what had occurred. A hasty movement of his arm at one stage of

the proceedings had swept one of his gloves from the table, and it was some time before he could find it in the gathering gloom. When he raised himself again, he found Sir Peter in a sort of swoon—his head fallen backwards, his eyes protruding, his face a strange gray tint.

Calling loudly for the valet, his summons was answered with surprising speed; and between them they moved him on to a bed, where he lay unconscious for some time. The doctor, who was hastily called in, pronounced the symptoms to be very grave, and due probably to a sudden shock to the nervous system, prescribing perfect rest, quietude, and freedom from excitement.

CHAPTER XIII.

HER LADYSHIP.

VERY early next morning Colonel Fayrer called to inquire after his friend's health. He sincerely pitied the old man who was so utterly alone, dependent on the companionship of his servant and tortured by suspicions that in a happier, healthier state of affairs never could have arisen in his mind, and had also an idea that the shock of his sudden discovery might terminate fatally. If this were so, he must not die alone ; even the presence of a comparatively new acquaintance were better than no one at all of his own station ; and if he were there, he might find an opportunity

to befriend the rightful heir, and strengthen that loyal little girl in her desire to do what was honourable and just.

It was of Nancy that he thought the most. His admiration had been increased a hundredfold by her conduct the previous day; in fact, where his feelings had been indefinite and intangible before, dreamings, founded on a pretty face and bright sweet voice, they now assumed more solid form, and would be henceforth part and parcel of his life. There was a slightly rueful smile upon his lips as he realized that the time might come when he would be ready to resign his hitherto overprized freedom and go into willing bondage to a tyrant, five feet two in height, soft and gentle of appearance, but whose flowery manacles would be as powerful to hold him as heavy chains of iron.

Mrs. Scarrot opened the door for him and volunteered a rather incoherent account of

what had happened since he left. The doctor had been once or twice, the lawyer was there and waiting to be summoned; the only one who had not appeared on the scene was the clergyman—‘and it’s my opinion he is most wanted of them all. It’s as well to have some idea of charity and common justice, even if it’s only got at secondhand, when one’s dying,’ she concluded, having evidently gained some notion of what was going on, and apparently under the impression that the cloak which ‘covers a multitude of sins’ was a garment which could be donned and doffed at pleasure, but was peculiarly suitable for sick-bed wear.

At the same moment the doctor came downstairs.

‘Sir Peter is much the same. It is only a question of days, perhaps hours. The one thing to be done for him is to keep him as easy in his mind as possible. Nothing more

but good nourishment, which is, of course, essential,' was his hurried verdict as he passed out.

Colonel Fayrer went upstairs, and finding the door of Sir Peter's bedroom ajar, and Jaynes standing opposite, made a sign to know if he might enter.

'My master has been asking for you since daybreak,' was the valet's quiet reply, moving a chair near to the bed.

Colonel Fayrer came in and took it, with a muttered hope he felt to be a mockery of good manners, that Sir Peter was feeling better.

A feeble smile came in reply.

'As well as ever I shall be. It is of no consequence. I seem to mind nothing now, only I want the money to fall into the right hands.'

'That is a very natural desire.'

'But you do not agree with me as to

where it should go. Have you thought well over what occurred yesterday ?'

Colonel Fayrer nodded.

'I am more assured than ever that it was wisely refused. Had she consented, it might have caused her more pain than pleasure. Remember, the outside world does not know Miss Nancy as we know her. The belief would be pretty general that she had wheedled you into leaving her the money; they might even go so far as to dispute the will, and to assert that you must have been of unsound mind when you made it.'

'I have thought of all that during the night while I lay awake, and have come to a new conclusion. It is to my *wife* I will leave everything.'

'Your wife—I understood she was *dead*,' blurted out Fayrer awkwardly.

'I mean to ask Nancy to marry me.'

'To marry you, now, when——'

He stopped short, but Sir Peter understood and finished the sentence for him.

‘When I am dying. Why, my dear sir, you don’t think I would ask her to be my wife if I were likely to live?’ he asked dryly.

Then, receiving no response, he went on haltingly, growing more exhausted with every breath :

‘I want you to be my ambassador. Explain to her that, if she refuses, no one more deserving will be the gainer. I shall leave it to some museum or communistic society, or to Jaynes here, who I dare say is a sheaf of crimes. Jaynes would not refuse it.’

The valet’s face was imperturbable, his smile as fixed and vague as ever, while he busied himself in pouring out a mixture into a glass, then holding it to his master’s lips.

Drinking it off, Sir Peter gained strength to continue :

‘Will you go and ask her if she will marry me for this reason?—marry me at once, to-day or to-morrow, before it is too late? It has been done before. No one can blame her, and I should die the happier. Will you go?’

‘You know my views on the subject. I should be a bad ambassador.’

‘I have no better. Be as neutral as you can reconcile it to your conscience to be—and—take my advice: don’t lose sight of the fact that when I die *my widow will be a mighty good match.*’

The other bit his lip to prevent a retort. Utterances on a death-bed, like words from the pulpit, cannot be answered, however the hearers may disagree with the sentiments expressed, and the doctor’s warning was still fresh in Fayrer’s mind.

‘I will go,’ he said, rising from his seat, ‘and let you know the result.’

‘The bribe is big enough. It ought to have its weight,’ said Sir Peter bitterly.

Does anyone consider the loneliness of a very rich man, without anyone belonging to him so near of kin as to be beyond suspicion of mercenary motives, who can, therefore, lavish tenderness and care, never so sorely needed as when soon it will be required no more? To live with no close friends is sufficiently sad, but to know that when one dies there are none that will grieve is infinitely worse; and Sir Peter’s unhappy nature, which had caused him to doubt even his wife’s love, which was so freely and generously given, had also separated him from others who were capable of disinterested friendship.

He had never realized until now how utterly alone he was, and the money which had intensified a trait in his character, always inherent, now assumed exaggerated value,

as mortals ever prize what costs them most.

It was all he had to count upon, so poor was he in every other respect, so forsaken, so forlorn.

Perhaps it was a dim appreciation of this pain that lessened Colonel Fayrer's indignation, and sent him away, more in sorrow than in anger, on his errand.

Mrs. Scarrot was still wandering aimlessly about the scene of action, very much excited and interested in all that went on, though terrified at the idea of a death taking place in the house, more especially in the absence of its mistress. She felt in a manner responsible for all that occurred, since everything had been left in her charge, and Nancy's contributions of help were seldom of a practical sort.

She was very earnest in her inquiries as to whether Sir Peter could possibly live until

Millicent returned, and when the Colonel told her rather impatiently that his knowledge did not extend beyond what she, too, had heard the doctor say, she retired in dudgeon to the kitchen, having first thrown open the door of the sitting-room and announced his coming.

Nancy rose from a chair by the fire as he entered. She was considerably sobered by the serious nature of recent circumstances, but forced a faint smile to cover her astonishment at his visit.

‘I bring a message from Sir Peter,’ he said in explanation.

‘I would have gone to him if he had sent. I thought he might be offended. Does he want me now?’

‘He did not commission me to say so. His message is a continuation of the subject of yesterday’s proposal,’ said the Colonel, the more stiffly that his feelings were very deeply moved.

He would have sympathized with any woman at such a juncture, much more with one so tenderly enshrined in his heart.

‘ You approved of what I said, then ?’

‘ I thought it very noble of you—very wise.’

‘ Yet you come to weaken my resolution. Remember, riches are a great temptation to a woman.’

‘ I rank you above most women, and I am here only as a mouthpiece for one who cannot come himself.’

‘ I—I hope Sir Peter is reconciled to his stepson,’ timidly.

‘ That will never be, I am afraid. It is a choice, he declares, between your taking the money and it being left to someone else—Jaynes, for example.’

‘ Then Jaynes must be promoted to the position of heir-apparent. How funnily he will fill it! Yet I dare say he would not

make a worse use of the money than I, unless——’

Something had evidently struck her suddenly, and he waited patiently for the idea to be developed, watching her with unbounded admiration as, with both her hands pressed tightly against her temples, she tried to concentrate her thoughts. He saw her face change as various emotions passed over it, her eyes reflecting the fleeting shadows that were thrown over the clear mirror of her mind. First she seemed filled with shy delight at some pleasant prospect, then covered with confusion at a quickly following fear; but eventually she appeared to arrive at some decision, for she looked very bright and determined when she spoke at last, her head upraised, her hands slightly clenched, as they hung down at her side.

‘The money would be mine to do as I liked with, I suppose?’

He nodded, a sense of disappointment strangling the words that should have come.

‘Then what,’ she asked triumphantly, ‘is to prevent my giving it back to the rightful owner?’

‘Ah! I quite understand you now. But do you think it would be quite honest, quite fair to Sir Peter, to accept his legacy with such an object in view?’

‘It would be doing wrong with a good object in view.’

‘But is that ever right?’ he questioned gently.

She looked at him in surprise, not having expected to hear a very high standard of morality from his lips. He had always seemed to her very worldly and very formal, altogether rather uninteresting, from the commonplaceness of his opinions and somewhat stereotyped manner of expressing them. Now she felt half inclined to rush into an

opposite extreme, and to see something heroic in the slight spare figure and sallow face, whose features were generally distorted by the eyeglass almost perpetually in use. Two sweet eyes full of reverential awe were lifted to his face, and may have considerably mollified the strictness of his views.

‘I am not so good as you,’ she confessed humbly. ‘To me it seems sufficient to *mean* to act for the best, and we women are more used, perhaps, to employ diplomacy as a substitute for the strength we lack. And then,’ with a charming burst of confidence in marked distinction to the rather stilted phrasing of her last words, ‘I would not mind sinning just a very little bit like that if I could help Mr. Wolffe.’

‘You know him well?’

‘Yes; he has been painting my picture—two pictures of me. It seems so very hard that he should lose what he had a

right to expect, and through no fault at all.'

'Then if you know him well you can best judge whether he would be likely to accept a fortune at your hands.'

She hesitated a little, and her colour deepened. It was impossible to explain to him that she trusted to love to bridge over the difficulty he foresaw; that she believed the lesser gift of money (possessed only to re-bestow) would be ignored and forgotten in the greater treasure she would bring him in herself and her proved devotion.

'I cannot tell you all; but I think he will take it,' she said in a low voice, that conveyed to the listener more than she divined.

'You know best; I must not presume to advise you,' he said gravely; 'but there is something else I have to tell you. To make your position more secure, and to save you from possible disagreeables, Sir Peter wishes

you to go through the form of marriage with him, a ceremony that cannot bind you in the least, since it is impossible he should live over the next few days.'

Nancy could not hide her dismay. The step, comparatively unimportant before, seemed at once to assume enormous proportions, and she dared no longer trust her own judgment. To take the money with the end she had in view, which partly justified it, might be permissible perhaps; but to take Sir Peter's name, and then in a sense betray him, appeared impossible at first sight. Besides, to marry at all at a moment's notice was alarming; and would it not be a desecration of a service, that should be holy, to use it for her own advantage, and with a motive not altogether true?

She turned towards Colonel Fayrer, trembling.

'I could not; I could not!' she cried

piteously, longing to be persuaded against her own conviction.

It was natural he should not understand the intricate working of her mind. The delicate degrees of right and wrong, the imperceptible lights and shades she herself could not have described very clearly, would have had one common tint to him who only had one law to rule his conduct, and that one precept—honour. If it were honourable to accept a fortune in the hope of cheating its owner into doing an act of justice, then a mere empty ceremony could make no difference in his opinion.

‘It is simply a form,’ he repeated, with a surprise that caused her own excitement to appear ridiculous and over-strained.

‘I could not possibly do anything of the sort while Millicent is away,’ she said, modifying her first objection.

‘And when does she return?’

‘To-morrow morning, by the first train.’

‘Perhaps you would rather wait until then; although, I ought to warn you, you risk losing everything by delay.’

‘Whatever happens I will wait. Tell Sir Peter it can only be if Millicent approves; I must not promise anything till she comes.’

He bowed his acquiescence and withdrew. In his heart he felt she was already wavering, and would in the end consent, with or without her sister’s sanction; not for her own sake, but for this artist’s, who had painted her portrait, and evidently created a warm interest in her breast.

When Sir Peter congratulated himself with feeble hilarity on a foregone success, he felt unable to combat his arguments, a jealous instinct predicting that Nancy would allow no one to save her from the rashness she contemplated if once assured the act was feasible, and not actually false.

The next day decided it. A telegram arrived from Millicent to say that she was unavoidably delayed, and could not arrive before the following morning; and this announcement, coupled with the doctor's opinion that his patient could not possibly last four-and-twenty hours, forced Nancy into an independent decision.

Every arrangement for the marriage had been made by Sir Peter in anticipation of her consent, when Colonel Fayrer was despatched for a final answer.

'Is it to be "yes" or "no"?' he asked gravely.

Pale and frightened, she looked into his face for counsel; but the fixed eyeglass seemed to spread over his face and become a wall of glass between them, causing him to appear cold and antipathetic. That the transparent barrier would have fallen at a word or glance she could not be supposed to know, nor did

she guess what a warmth of feeling lay behind it.

‘Wait one moment ; I will come back,’ she said in a breathless whisper, and was out of the room and half-way up the creaking kitchen stairs before his assent was uttered.

Yesterday she had waited about in the hall, hoping to intercept Wolffe either coming in or going out, and to discover what were his ideas on the subject ; but he had not returned home until long after she was in bed, and she had had no opportunity of seeing him that morning. Now she went boldly to his door, determined to seek an interview, and to ask him straight out if he would wish her to do this thing on his account.

But a vigorous knocking gained no response. Finding it impossible to settle down to work, he had gone out for a long walk, and was at the present moment striding across the Downs at a swinging pace, glad of

the sharp exercise to counteract his excitement, and utterly unaware how much was occurring that nearly concerned his future fate. Indeed, it was of Millicent he was mostly thinking, longing for her return, yet dreading it, as it must be the signal for his own departure, and he saw no hope of prosecuting the acquaintance so ill-omenedly begun.

Crestfallen, yet inwardly convinced that Wolffe's absence might be for the best, since perhaps no man would, if the question were put to him, permit a woman to sacrifice her natural scruples on his account, Nancy returned to the lower sitting-room, where Colonel Fayrer still stood; his attitude the same, and his thoughts unaltered, only intensified by pity.

‘I have decided. Tell Sir Peter it is “yes,”’ she said, not looking up from the ground.

‘ You have well considered ?’

‘ I am doing what I believe is best—for others. I am not thinking of myself.’

‘ And I am only thinking of you. It is an important step. Be sure you make no mistake.’

She remained unmoved, and something impelled him to add impressively :

‘ Remember, money is often a bar to happiness.’

Had she looked in his face then she could not have called it cold. A deep flush suffused his sallow complexion, and the glass having fallen from his eye, his kindly glance was unfettered. He would have sacrificed his own good to have secured hers, and what he felt most was his powerlessness to interfere, being ignorant of all the circumstances of the case.

He saw that she shivered at his words as though struck by a sudden chill, but her

courage reasserted itself at once, and, believing she was doing right, she returned firmly :

‘ I have quite decided. I can be ready in half an hour.’

So much delay she had requested for no special reason, only from a vague idea of gaining time—a hope, undeclared even to herself, that something might occur during the interval to prevent so decisive an action, or simplify its execution ; but now, when she was alone, she did not know how to use it.

To tell Mrs. Scarrot was the first thing, and a faint smile at the way in which her news was received momentarily illumined her face.

‘ *He* to be thinking of marrying ! Why isn’t he “ making his soul ” ? ’ she cried, sinking into a chair, and tearing open her dress-buttons at the throat, as though anticipating a fainting fit and taking preliminary precau-

tion. Then, as suddenly recovering, she exclaimed eagerly :

‘ And you’ll be “ my lady,” after all ! I’m glad I lived to see the day. You’ll be rich, and Miss Millicent ’ll have no cause to trouble herself farther. It’ll be a grand surprise for her. Little she dreamt of it when she went away.’

To this Nancy made no reply, a vivid memory coming back to her of a former surprise she had planned, which had not had a happy ending.

As the time grew nearer she went up to her own room, moved thereto by the impulse deeply ingrained in woman’s nature to adorn herself for every occasion whether it be festival or funeral. She washed her hands, arranged her hair, and presently, her lovely face uplifted, was examining an almost imperceptible spot upon her chin with horrified dismay. Then the hand-glass was thrown

down impatiently. She was disgusted with her own frivolity, and angry because every now and then the subject that should have been all-important floated from her mind, displaced by absurdly trivial thoughts.

The charwoman, who had followed her upstairs, and was fidgeting around her in a state of delighted unrest, suggested that she must change her gown, which was shabby, and, moreover, being black, unlucky. She turned round impatiently.

‘It is no marriage—it is the merest form,’ she said petulantly, arguing against her own conviction rather than Mrs. Scarrot’s, which, though sketchy, had a comparatively firm foundation.

‘Marriage is marriage,’ she said doggedly; ‘this day’s work will be more serious than you think. To love, honour, and obey in *sickness and in health*’ (this emphasis, as though the phrase had special bearing on the

case in point) 'is hard enough, as you will find.'

Nancy opened her lips to speak, but closed them again. What, however, she felt a delicacy in mentioning Mrs. Scarrot remembered, and she had no scruple in remarking :

'To be sure it makes a difference if your husband dies off-hand. A woman had need to be an angel to live a lifetime with a man, and never hanker after a change. There's precious little gingerbread under the gilt, and all gingerbread gets soft with keeping—not that you'll keep *him* long.' Her tone of satisfaction was finely tempered by decent regret, and she dismally shook her head.

Despairing of impressing the facts upon this woman's mind, Nancy gave a final glance into the mirror, and settled her gown preparatory to descending.

The charwoman had all the realism inseparable from her class, and could not grasp

the incident of this marriage, which was *no* marriage so far as duties and moral obligations went, but the merest ceremony to ensure a succession to property, whose inheritance might otherwise be disputed. Equally ready to view it from a sentimental or religious point, she could not see that it was purely a business transaction ; or divest herself of the idea that Sir Peter would have a miraculous renewal of health and strength, and in the end carry off his bride in a coach and four amidst showers of rice and blessings.

She accompanied Nancy downstairs, and when they came to Sir Peter Cairne's room, first wiped her mouth with a corner of her apron, then solemnly kissed her.

‘I’ll wait outside, close to the door, until it’s over. You’ll like to think you’ve some *women folk* about you, even if it’s only me. God bless you, child !’

With these last words ringing in her ears, distinct and separate from all the inconsequence that had characterized the rest of the charwoman's observations, Nancy passed inside, and found everybody waiting.

If any intention of making a passionate appeal to Sir Peter's sense of justice had been in her mind, it was stifled at sight of his face as it lay back on the pillow, gray and fixed in its expression of stern resolve. He looked utterly unlike what she remembered, though it was only two days since she had seen him. His anger then was not so terrible as his present relentless calm, and even had not the presence of strangers restrained her, she would not have dared to speak. He himself uttered no greeting, fearful, perhaps, of wasting his strength; he only made a signal for the ceremony to begin.

Nancy went through it in a dream, conscious sometimes of the solemn words that

would cause so great a revolution in her existence, while every now and then her mind went wandering away, and dwelt with aggravating intensity on quite irrelevant matters.

She was recalled from one of these mental divagations by the necessity of putting on the symbol of her altered state ; and as her finger felt the cold contact of the plain broad ring, she glanced at Sir Peter Cairne. His eyes were eager, his expression was as resolute as ever ; he seemed to be growing stronger with the fulfilment of his wishes ; and as his hand clasped hers convulsively, sudden forebodings arose within her mind. Suppose, after all, he should live ; suppose Wolffe should misconstrue her motive ; suppose—a hundred suppositions started up before her. No longer able to blind herself to what she had done, or to lull her scruples by a repetition of the phrase, that had become almost mechanical,

‘that it was a mere form,’ Nancy grew paler and paler, and before the service was concluded had once or twice to grasp the nearest object for support. Her knees were tottering; her brain, confused and troubled, was cruelly sensitive to the doubt whether she might not have taken up a burden too heavy for her to bear.

When a general movement told her that the ceremony was at an end, she turned with an excited sob to leave the room, anxious to get away from this atmosphere of oppression. Colonel Fayrer opened the door and caught her hand, pressing it closely with an impulsiveness quite foreign to his usually languid manner as he wished her happiness.

Somehow the words, which were meant to reassure and blot out the memory of his dehortations, had a contrary effect; they reminded Nancy vividly of what he had said to her last, ‘Money is often a bar to hap-

piness,' and she felt faint with apprehension when, as she reached the hall, she heard a latch-key turn in the door and the next moment stood face to face with Wolffe. He came quickly towards her.

‘How is Sir Peter? Have you seen him?’ he asked with solicitude.

Nancy’s two small hands went up to her throat as though trying to force out a reply, but no sound came, since words can only follow the action of the mind, and hers was then a blank. She did not know how to begin her story, how to explain her motives; and the knowledge that if she touched a wrong note his attention would be out of tune with her recital, and would result in irreclaimable discord, did not restore her equanimity. Had she listened to the promptings of her overstrained nerves, she would have fled, but she retained sufficient composure to remember that unmistakable

fear always looks suspiciously like guilt, and she was not guilty.

There was a feeling in her heart that he might even see something of nobility in her conduct if only she could explain clearly why she had acted thus.

All her new dignity, however, did not help to sustain her at this juncture. She was hot and confused, and Wolffe's question appeared as though it must remain unanswered, when like a douche of cold water, every drop of which communicates an icy chill, there came from behind her a reply:

‘ Sir Peter is much the same, sir. Milady has been with him now.’

Without turning, Nancy knew it was Jaynes who had come upon her so noiselessly, and who was watching this interview on which so much depended—perhaps, she thought, with a childish thrill of fear, throwing an ‘evil eye’ upon it.

‘Milady!’ repeated Wolffe blankly.

The searching glance he threw upon the frightened face seemed to read its secrets, yet failed to find the motive which had ennobled her reckless action. The wide-open eyes, unshadowed by their lashes and undimmed by tears, met his, alarmed, and half imploringly; the parted lips quivered once or twice distressfully, but gained no pity.

Before the valet spoke again, and put the matter beyond a doubt, Wolffe had a premonition how it was — that this fragile, innocent-looking girl had defrauded him of his birthright, and stood shamelessly in his mother’s place, a robber as well as a usurper.

‘Lady Cairne is fatigued, sir. I think she ought to rest,’ observed Jaynes in his most automatic manner, although in his face there was a diabolical enjoyment of the situation. If he had waited years for his revenge, it was

complete now, and exquisitely sweet was its savour.

‘I will not stand in Lady Cairne’s way,’ said Wolffe with bitter irony, and, bowing low, he passed into his room.

END OF VOL. I.

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